

Truth  
a work of fiction

An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

by

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## Abstract

This short novel deals with possible consequences arising from the use of sperm banks, especially those which are not regulated by the government. Narrated by Lora Fleming, it chronicles the harrowing and emotionally-charged months after the birth of her granddaughter. In a shocking conclusion, deceptions and family secrets are revealed, forcing the characters to restructure their lives and new realities. Though entirely fictional, this novel was designed to be as realistic as possible, causing the reader to consider the "what ifs" of life in this age of medical technology.

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My little boy is all grown up. I can't believe he's going to be a father! I've had this same thought, in various forms, all of his life, but especially during the past four or five years. First, it was "I can't believe he's in college." He looked so mature, standing in his cramped dorm room, surrounded by boxes, assuring us that he would be fine. Four years later, when he graduated with a degree in education, I couldn't believe that, either. It was the second time I'd seen him in a cap and gown. I thought that day, as he walked across the stage, that this was it: I'd finally accepted that he was an adult.

I was, of course, wrong. Scarcely three months after his graduation, as I sat in the front pew of the church and listened to he and Olivia exchange vows, I was again amazed. My son, my baby, a married man. I wonder, sometimes, if I'll ever be able to see him differently, if I'll stop thinking of him as "my child" or "my baby." I've given this a lot of thought, actually, and I think that the answer is no. He'll always be my baby, even when he's fifty.

"Beth," I call to Olivia's mother, who is seated across from me. She looks up from her magazine and I ask, "are you ever amazed that Olivia is an adult? I mean, does it feel like no time at all has passed since she was born?" Out of the corner of my eye, I can see my husband Martin grinning as I ask this question. He and I have had this conversation before, multiple times. He has always assured me that everyone feels this way--but I'm curious to hear what Beth has to say, all the same. I think mothers and fathers see their children differently, sometimes. Aside from the curiosity factor, I have another motivation in asking: perhaps conversation will make the time pass more quickly. Sitting deadly silent, reading four-month-old magazines does little to occupy my brain. I'm really getting bored, and thus, anxious.

"I am amazed at times, actually," Beth confesses. "I look at this new, adult incarnation of

my daughter and I'm very proud of her--but then I think, is this the same little girl I used to dress in ruffled pink dresses and little lacy socks?" She smiles at this memory. "Why do you ask?"

"Oh, I'm just having one of those "my baby's all grown up" days. It's hard to believe I'm going to be a grandmother before the day is out."

"I know what you mean. With Olivia and me, it's strange. It's just the two of us, you know--" I nod; I do know. The circumstances of Beth's pregnancy are as interesting as--and maybe more interesting than--the circumstances of my own. "I don't have any children to compare her to in terms of development or age, so the progression seems normal to me, but then at the same time, once she graduated and went to college, she was gone, and I had no one left at home. Does that make sense?" Beth looks at me, a slight frown on her face.

I understand her sentiments completely, and I tell her so. We're well into a discussion on the unique aspects of raising an only child when Caleb pokes his head into the waiting room to give us another update-- "the contractions are getting closer together, but still no baby." I look at my watch; we've been here for ten hours, Martin, Beth, and I. Olivia and Caleb have been here for seventeen. I look up at Martin to find him smiling down at me. He knows I'm anxious for this baby--our first grandchild--to be born. I've been eagerly awaiting this day since the moment Caleb and Olivia broke the news to us. Martin is also excited, but in a more understated way. He's a quiet man, doesn't show his emotions on his face or wear his heart on his sleeve like I do. Despite this seemingly major difference, we're perfect together. I let my mind drift back to the early days of our relationship.

I was twenty-five when I met Martin; Caleb was four months old. Caleb was born in June, so I'd taken May and August as my two month's maternity leave. Back then, when I was

just a few years older than my students, I liked to go to the sporting events and cheer them on--I particularly liked cross country meets and basketball games. That year, the captain of our men's cross country team was in my British Lit. class, so I tried to make it to as many meets as possible. Several weeks after my return from maternity leave, they went head-to-head with their biggest rival, so I took Caleb and went to the meet. I went down to congratulate my students afterwards and nearly ran head-on into a very attractive man. "They were fantastic, weren't they?" I asked, trying to make conversation, after I apologized for running into him. "It was a great competition." It had been neck-and-neck the whole meet, but we'd eventually edged up for the win.

"Absolutely amazing!" he agreed. When he started discussing the performance of specific runners, I realized we were not discussing the same team. This made me laugh, which stopped him cold, right in the middle of a sentence. "What's so funny?" he asked, curiously.

"Just that I was talking about Forrest, and you're talking about Kennedy!" He looked at me, shocked.

"You thought Forrest's performance amazing?"

"We won, didn't we?" How dare he suggest that my students were anything less than phenomenal? "I suppose I should have introduced myself and avoided all of this confusion," I said, still laughing. "Lora Graffmeyer. I teach English at Forrest."

His eyes widened. "Good to meet you," he said and extended his hand. I shifted Caleb's diaper bag higher on my arm so I could shake his hand. "Martin Fleming. I teach history and coach cross country at Kennedy." Ouch! I hadn't expected that one! I guess it's a good thing I hadn't said anything really insulting about his team.

“It’s nice to meet you, Martin, but I really should be going,” I said, looking at my watch. As I looked up, I noticed his very pointed gaze directed at my left hand. I hoped for the best and braced myself for the worst. During my pregnancy and the four months since Caleb was born, I’d had some very negative responses to the fact that I was a single mother, as well as some positive--or at least neutral--ones. “I’ve got papers to grade yet this evening, and my son’s going to get really grouchy if he doesn’t eat soon.” I smiled at him and turned to leave.

The sound of his voice stopped me. “This may be impertinent, given that we’ve just met, but can I ask if you’re married? I notice that you’re not wearing a ring.”

“No, I’m not,” I said simply, not elaborating.

“How lucky for me,” he said quietly to himself. I got the feeling that he hadn’t intended me to hear that statement. “In that case, would it be all right if I called you sometime?” he asked.

Wow. OK. “Sure, that would be fine.” He fumbled in his pocket for a piece of paper and I reeled off my number for him. “Not to be rude, but I really do have to be going,” I said apologetically, indicating Caleb, who had begun squirming in my arms. It was a gesture I knew well after four months: in about three minutes, he was going to start screaming. I turned to leave again, and this time Martin didn’t stop me.

Apparently the fact that I was unmarried with a child hadn’t intimidated him in the least. He called me the following weekend and asked me to dinner. I called my sister Lily to babysit, and dinner was wonderful. The rest, as they say, is history.

That first date sparked another, then another, until we were seeing each other every weekend, and talking on the phone nearly every day in between. The weekends fell into a predictable pattern--we would go out one night, and the other night we would spend at either his

apartment or mine, cooking dinner and just enjoying each other's company. Lily generally babysat Caleb while Martin and I went out, but sometimes we took him with us, and he always went with me whenever I went to Martin's. We looked like any typical American family when the three of us were together.

One Saturday night, Martin invited me over for dinner, but I arrived to find that he had already cooked everything. We ate dinner by candlelight with soft music playing in the background; it was very romantic. I fell in love with him all over again that night. I was hardly surprised when, at the end of the meal, he pulled a velvet ring box from his pocket. "Lora, I love you more than anything or anyone in the world," he whispered, kneeling down before me. "Will you marry me?"

I shrieked a little. When I say I wasn't surprised, I mean that I knew our relationship was heading towards marriage. I didn't know that it was heading there this particular night, though. "Yes, Martin, I'll marry you," I managed to gasp, pulling him to his feet and hugging him tightly. I was elated.

As the wedding day drew near, Martin and I frequently discussed what we called "serious life topics"-- like where we would live after we married, what we planned to do about our finances, things of that sort. One night the subject of children came up. Caleb was nearing two years old, by the time we were married and ready to have a child, there would be a nearly perfect age separation, I thought.

Martin grew strangely silent when I brought the topic up, then looked at me with terrible worry in his eyes. "Lora, I haven't been completely honest with you," he said in a deadly serious voice. I was really worried; I didn't know what to think. What hadn't he told me? I knew he'd



been married before, but he hadn't said anything about children. I was suddenly afraid he had fifteen children I didn't know about, not that it would make a difference. "I don't know how to put this delicately, so I'll just say it: I'm sterile. I can't have children." Oh. Wow. I wasn't expecting that. I heard the words, my brain processed them, but I had no idea what kind of response I should make.

"I don't know what I should say," I said to him. "All of the sudden I thought you were going to tell me that you had children I didn't know about!" I laughed in half-relief, but his expression remained serious.

"That's why we divorced, you see. She wanted to have children, and we tried repeatedly, but she never got pregnant. We were both tested and she was perfectly fertile. I wasn't. She was very set on having children, and when she found out that I couldn't make her pregnant, she filed for divorce. I didn't bring it up before because I was worried that you would feel the same way," he finished.

"Oh, Martin, no. I want to be with you even more than I want to have another child. If we decided later that we really want another child, we can always adopt, right?" I meant every word.

"About Caleb," Martin began. "I was wondering how you'd feel about my adopting him? I feel like a father to him; I want him to be my son. Of course, it's up to you." We discussed this idea for several weeks before coming to a decision. Though we both discussed the pros and cons of it, Martin left the ultimate decision in my hands, as he'd said.

And I ultimately decided that I wanted my son to have a real father, which Martin was.

Caleb suddenly comes running out of the delivery room, interrupting my reverie, yelling

something about pushing and a head, and Martin and I both jump to our feet. Caleb manages to gasp out that it shouldn't be long now, then runs back to the room. I'm too excited to sit down, so I pace the cramped waiting room, walking from one end to the other, covering the distance in eight steps. Reminds me of a professor I had in college. He'd pace while he lectured, nine steps one way, turn, nine steps back. Watching him was like watching a one-man tennis match. I check my watch once, then again, finding that only three minutes have passed since the first time I checked. Time always moves slower when you're waiting for something. I remember when I was pregnant, it felt like nine years, rather than nine months.

I didn't know *what* to think when I first found out I was pregnant. I'd been dating Nick for a year and a half; I was sure he was going to ask me to marry him. Then one day he told me he was tired of the Midwest. "I think I'll go to Seattle," he told me. "I'll call you when I get there." Three days later he was gone, and a month later my doctor confirmed that I was about two months pregnant. Nick never called. I didn't know what to do. It was 1972; single mothers weren't as common as they are today. I had really three options: I could abort the baby and no one would ever have to know I was pregnant, I could carry the baby full term and give it up for adoption, or I could keep it. I ruled abortion out quickly. It went against everything I had been brought up to believe. I was left, then, with the choice between keeping the baby and giving it up for adoption. The more I thought about it, though, I knew I couldn't give my baby up for adoption. Once I decided that, I was so eager for him (or her) to be born, and the months just seemed to drag on forever. I was so excited when I finally went into labor, strange as that may sound.

"It's a girl!" *It's a girl!* I stop pacing when I hear Caleb shout these words. *It's a girl!* I

turn to see my son standing again at the entrance to the waiting room, beckoning. "Come see her," he urges us. "She's beautiful. She looks just like Olivia." We follow him, eager to peer at the tiny bundle wrapped in a soft pink blanket. Olivia manages to look exhausted and exhilarated at the same time. I recall Caleb's birth and think I know how she must be feeling. Giving birth is hard work. Their daughter--my granddaughter--is adorable, with a head full of fuzzy brown hair and a pair of brown eyes to match. She certainly seems to have inherited her mother's features, though I think she has Caleb's nose. I reach to stroke her cheek and marvel at the smoothness of her young skin.

"Congratulations Caleb, Olivia," Martin says, reaching to embrace Caleb. "She's a beautiful little girl. What have you decided to name her?" Last we'd heard, they were deciding between Clara and Holly.

Olivia answers that she "just looks more like a Clara than a Holly, so we're naming her Clara Ellen." An old-fashioned name, Clara is--actually, both Clara and Ellen are rather old-fashioned, I supposed--but Olivia is right. The names suits this tiny dark-haired child. Olivia begins to look more and more weary by the minute, and I can tell that she needs to rest. The nurse comes to take Clara to the nursery, and so Martin and I say our goodbyes and head for home.

"It was a long wait," he says to me during the drive home. "Was it worth it?" What a question to ask a woman, a mother, who has just become a grandmother for the first time. I look at my husband, see his grin, and realize he is joking. I grin, too, and lean my head back against the seat. We've got a twenty-minute drive ahead of us, plenty of time for me to catch a short nap. It's nearly midnight, after all, and I've got to teach in the morning. Come to think of it, so does

Martin--*he* certainly shouldn't be sleeping now! I think better of taking a nap, deciding it would be more beneficial to keep an eye on my husband to make sure he doesn't fall asleep. I reach over to click the radio on and drift off into my own thoughts. She really is a beautiful baby...

I wish my parents could see her. They would love her. Caleb was one of only four grandchildren (Lily having two kids and Jon one); Mom would have been so excited to have a great-granddaughter. Dad's been gone for fourteen years now, Mom for ten. Sometimes it seems so unreal...they were there one day and gone the next. When the heart attack took Dad, it was hard on us all. With Jon and Lily and I grown up and not living at home anymore, I think it hit Mom the hardest. She started smoking more and more, trying to deal with the pain. It was hard to sit by and watch, so we all tried to ignore it. It was like she wanted to go with him; she didn't want to live alone. We were surprised when she was diagnosed with lung cancer, but we shouldn't have been. I knew Mom was depressed, and I looked the other way. None of that matters now, though. I just wish they could see Clara...

A hand gently rubbing my arm awakens me. I open my eyes and find myself sitting in a stationary car, in my garage. I guess I fell asleep anyway, despite my best intentions. Well, we made it home safely and we have a new granddaughter. All's well that ends well, right?

Such an ironic choice of words. Caleb calls me at work several months after Clara is born and tells me in a very grave voice that "something is wrong." He and Olivia, apparently, have noticed Clara acting strangely. "How serious?" I ask my son. He doesn't know. They're taking her to the pediatrician this afternoon.

"Do you want me to come with you? I can get someone to cover the rest of my classes

this afternoon,” I offer.

“No, Mom, that’s really not necessary,” he assures me. “I just wanted to let you know.”

I hang up wondering why he called. I understand that he wants to keep me informed, but now I’m just going to worry all afternoon. It’s a frustrating position, really.

Caleb calls later that evening to tell us that the doctor drew some blood from Clara and is running tests on it. A day later, the results come back: Tay-Sachs disease.

“What exactly does that mean?” I ask, almost demanding, as the entire family--Martin, Beth, Caleb and Olivia with Clara, and me--is gathered in the pediatrician’s office, listening to these results.

“I was getting to that,” Dr. Lowry says firmly, holding his hands up as if to ward off an attack. I nod, clasp my hands tightly in my lap, and sit back in my chair. I just want to know what’s wrong with my granddaughter. Each minute without knowing seems to drag on interminably.

“Actually,” Dr. Lowry begins, “I was quite surprised to make this diagnosis for Clara. Tay-Sachs is a disease that usually strikes Jewish people with Eastern European ancestry.” Noting our confused expressions, he explains: “Please note that I said ‘usually.’ Anyone can possess this gene, it’s just more common for that demographic. If the gene was passed on by only one ancestor, it could continue to be passed along--undetected--for many years through many generations.

“Tay-Sachs Disease is an autosomal recessive disease. This means that the “normal” gene is the dominant one--a person can carry one normal gene and one gene for Tay-Sachs and show no signs of the disease. This is the case with Caleb and Olivia.” Dr. Lowry turns to face

them, explaining. "We call you carriers: you carry the gene for Tay-Sachs but are not affected. When two carriers produce a child, that child has a one in four chance of being affected with Tay-Sachs. This is the case with Clara."

Fascinating, really. I've never known much about medical things. A guy I dated in college was studying medicine--we eventually broke up because he was always busy and never had time for our relationship. I didn't learn much from him. What I really want to know right now is what this means for Clara. I look from Martin to Caleb and Olivia and can tell that they are wondering the same.

"What's the prognosis?" Martin inquires gently, needing but not wanting to know.

"As Caleb and Olivia noticed, Clara has stopped turning over and trying to crawl. That is one of the primary symptoms of Tay-Sachs. Eventually, Clara will become paralyzed and blind; she will be unaware of her surroundings." Dr. Lowry delivers these words in the most compassionate manner, but the pain they cause is worse than being run through with a sword. Olivia hugs Clara more tightly to her body and silent tears begin to roll down Caleb's somber face.

I understand their grief; I am feeling it too. I can feel tears welling up behind my eyes, but I want to be strong for my son. I blink quickly, trying to stave them off. A glance at Beth reveals that she is doing the same. Her hands grip the armrests of her vinyl chair so tightly that her knuckles have gone white.

"How long?" Caleb chokes out between tears.

"Children affected by Tay-Sachs Disease die before age five," Dr. Lowry states quietly.

Five years?! We might have less than four-and-a-half years' more time with this precious child

in our lives? This is cruel, wrong, unfair! It can't be true, it can't. My tiny baby granddaughter can't die before she's even had a chance to live.

A bit of rational thought breaks through this tumult of emotions that is flooding my brain. If I'm feeling this distraught and upset, imagine what Caleb and Olivia must be feeling. Their pain is probably four times as great as mine. I reach over and grab Martin's arm as I regard my son and his wife. Both are still sitting stock-still, staring at Dr. Lowry, as if trying to absorb all that he has told them.

"Please don't feel that I'm abandoning you or trying to get rid of you," the doctor begins, "but I think it would be best for you all to go home and talk this over. I know you must be experiencing a great deal of shock and confusion, and it's best that you talk that out with each other. I will of course be available to answer any questions you might have, or to speak with you again. Feel free to call my office."

Despite his assurances to the contrary, I get the distinct impression that he is, in fact, trying to remove us from his office. I can imagine that this is a very trying part of his job, giving families the devastating news of terminal illness.

Martin is the first to stand, removing my hand from its death grip on his arm in the process. This done, he tugs gently but firmly on my hand until I am standing beside him. I close my eyes and inhale deeply. Be strong, Lora. Your family needs you. Steadied, I step quickly across the cramped office to where Beth is now standing beside Olivia and Caleb. Dr. Lowry has stepped discreetly into the hallway. Beth gently pries Clara from Olivia's arms as Martin and I help Caleb and Olivia to their feet and usher them out the door. A somber, heavy-hearted group,

we head home to face our tragic reality.

Clara's diagnosis was horrible. I can think of almost nothing worse than an innocent child dying an early death. I knew this diagnosis would forever change the lives of those I cared about. Little did I know just how very much our lives would change. She was diagnosed in September of 1997. One Wednesday evening in March of the following year, Martin and I are sitting at home watching TV when the front door open and Olivia walks in, followed by Caleb with a motionless Clara in his arms. "What a surprise!" Martin exclaims, standing and clicking the television off at the same time.

"What are you guys doing here?" I ask as I take first Olivia's jacket, then Caleb's and Clara's. They look at each other significantly before Olivia replies.

"Oh, it was such a nice night, we wanted to get out of the house." She darts a look at Caleb, then follows Martin into the family room. What was that all about? At my urging, Caleb hands Clara to me. She has, as Dr. Lowry predicted, become more paralyzed as the months have passed. It saddens me at times to hold her and talk to her, only to receive no response. It upsets me that Clara's quality of life is not what it could be, and to know there's nothing to be done.

We make chit-chatty small talk for a while--what Caleb's, Martin's, and my students are studying, whether it will snow again before Spring actually arrives, current events--before Caleb finally blurts out what I'm sure was his actual motive in making this surprise visit. "Mom, Dad," he begins in a rush, "Olivia and I are thinking of having another baby." This astounds me, leaves me speechless for a moment. Martin, too, is floored by the news. Clara is still so young. To have two children under two years old would be a lot of work.



“Well, that’s wonderful, dear,” I say, determined to be supportive. My gaze shifts to Olivia. “You’re not pregnant yet, then?”

“No, not yet,” she assures me. After a sideways glance at Caleb, she continues. “We are concerned that another child of ours might be affected with Tay-Sachs, like Clara. Caleb and I think it would be a good idea to have everyone--you guys and Mom--tested to see who’s carrying the gene.”

I am alarmed at this idea that my son and his wife have concocted. “Do you think that’s really necessary? Wouldn’t it be enough to know that you and Olivia are both carriers?”

“Right,” Martin pipes up. “The way your doctor explained it when Clara was first diagnosed, you each are carrying one normal gene and one gene for Tay-Sachs. That means...let’s see...your child has a one in four chance of being affected with Tay-Sachs. Isn’t that what he said?” Martin looks at me, then to Caleb and Olivia for confirmation. I nod, but Caleb seems agitated. “Are you really willing to take that much of a risk?” Martin asks, concern in his voice.

“Please, just do it,” he implores us. “I think it’s really important to have a complete genetic history before going ahead with a new baby. I’d ask for all of the grandparents to be tested to, if they were still alive. You might not think this is important, but we do,” Caleb says firmly, reaching for Olivia’s hand. “Give it some thought, OK? This is one time that I’m asking you both for something that means a lot to me--and to Olivia and our future children.”

The lighthearted mood of the evening broken, he and Olivia leave soon after this impassioned plea, leaving Martin and I to talk the situation over. Truthfully, I don’t think there’s any question that we’ll go ahead with the testing. If our getting tested for the Tay-Sachs gene

will give Caleb and Olivia peace of mind or ease their pain, I'll do it. I'm sure Martin feels the same. I'm very reluctant, though; I won't deny that.

Martin calls Caleb and Olivia with our decision late the next afternoon, and an hour later Olivia has set us--all of us, including Beth, who has moved from Oklahoma into an apartment near Caleb and Olivia--an appointment for Tuesday morning.

When Tuesday morning rolls around, I am filled with dread. I sit with my head turned as the nurse takes blood from the crook of my elbow with a long needle. She scurries to the lab with my blood and I pray fervently that it is from me that Caleb inherited this gene that he passed on to Clara. Otherwise, there will be questions, painful questions, about the past. Questions that will have to be answered but that I am unwilling to answer.

I rejoin Martin in the waiting room--a nonspecific, drab, crowded room somewhere between maternity and surgery. He is slouched in a chair in one corner of the room, a pained expression on his face. I know he is having the same fears as I, fears that neither of us possess the gene that Caleb and Clara inherited. Fears that a past that was once buried and gone will be brought up again. Because we are having these tests for "informational" reasons only and not to make a diagnosis, the results won't be in for three days. We go home to wait and hope and pray.

The tests come back and our worst fears are confirmed. "Neither you, Mrs. Fleming, nor your husband show evidence of possessing the Tay-Sachs gene," the doctor tells us. "As I'm sure you know, Clara's condition is caused by a recessive gene." He searches his desk and comes up with a blank sheet of paper and draws a diagram as he explains. "In order for her to

actually be afflicted with the disorder, she had to inherit two recessive alleles. Caleb and Olivia both carry one dominant, one recessive. They're what we call 'carriers'--they're carrying the potential for the disorder but are not affected. In order for this to have happened, each would have to have inherited the normal gene from one parent, and the Tay-Sachs from the other. This could play out in a variety of ways: both parents could be carriers--having one normal and one Tay-Sachs each-- or one parent could be a carrier and the other could have both normal. Do you understand?" We nod. This is the same thing Dr. Lowry told us when he first diagnosed Clara, with a bit more detail.

What he's saying, then, is that Caleb did not inherit the Tay-Sachs gene from either of us--which can mean only one thing. Strangely enough, Beth--Olivia's mother--also tests negative for the Tay-Sachs gene. The doctor questions Olivia's father's absence from this gathering. Beth pipes up quickly to explain that Olivia was conceived through artificial insemination, using donor sperm from a sperm bank. Thus, she has no idea who Olivia's father might be. Though it surprises the doctors, this tidbit of information comes as no shock to the rest of us. Olivia has known the circumstances of her conception from the time she was old enough to understand, and she has no inhibitions about sharing her story with others.

I sit in this doctor's office on an uncomfortable vinyl chair--dragged in from the waiting room for this meeting because of the number of people in the office--and look from my son to his wife. Their expressions are so sad, they make me want to cry. I feel tears welling up in my eyes and I blink quickly to keep them from falling and focus my attention on the doctor, who has begun speaking again. "We're going to send the blood through the lab again," he informs us. "It is impossible," he states firmly, "that Caleb and Olivia should both have a gene that their parents

do not. Perhaps an error has occurred somewhere. Another series of tests should clear things up; I will run these myself to make sure there are no errors.” He sends us away with another appointment set for the following Friday.

One week after hearing the first results, I find myself in the same uncomfortable vinyl chair, surrounded by the same faces, hearing the same information. A repeated battery of tests, this time run by the doctor himself, once again shows that neither Martin, nor I, nor Beth possess this gene. My body wants to collapse upon itself; my mind wants to shut off. This is all my fault.

As we begin filing out of his office, the doctor calls Martin and I back. “I don’t mean to pry, Mr. Fleming, but is it possible that you are not Caleb’s natural father?” he asks when we have re-entered the office and shut the door.

I cover my face with both hands as Martin replies. “I am not. I adopted him when he was scarcely two years old. What makes you ask?” I am amazed at the calmness of Martin’s voice. He’s handling this much better than I would be, were I in his position.

“Given your blood type and Mrs. Fleming’s, it is impossible that the two of you could produce a child with Caleb’s blood type. I didn’t mention this after the first set of tests because I was unsure that they were conducted correctly. I also don’t like to accuse my patients--it usually turns out badly for all involved, myself included. I hope I’ve not offended you by asking.”

“Not at all,” Martin replies gallantly, though I can tell that he’s upset. I imagine he’s feeling as I am--we’d really rather Caleb not hear about this.

“You might consider speaking with Caleb about this; he’s very intent on knowing his genetic history,” the doctor tells us, then leaves the room.

“Well, it’s our affair and we’ll handle it as we like, thank you very much!” Martin mutters at his back. This is what I was afraid of: that my family as I know it would begin to unravel. With his prying, this doctor has picked at a loose thread. We slowly leave the office and return to the waiting room.

“What was that all about?” Caleb asks when we enter.

“Oh, nothing,” I reply in the most casual voice I can muster. “Come on, let’s get out of this place.”

Before Martin and I leave, I draw Beth into the hall to ask her a question that’s been bouncing around in my brain. “I was wondering what you know about the donor’s whose sperm you used to conceive Olivia,” I begin. I can see Beth’s expression change; perhaps I’ve asked too personal a question. “I mean, if you’ve still got the name of the sperm bank and some information about the donor, maybe because of Clara’s situation you’d be able to find out who he is.”

She thinks a moment before answering me. “It’s been done before, I know, that the courts have forced sperm banks to reveal certain confidential information. I must say, the thought has crossed my mind. I entertained the idea only briefly, though.”

“Why is that?” I’m curious.

“Several reasons, actually. I don’t think tracking him down will do anyone much good, really. Depending on how much sperm he donated, he could have a hundred children scattered across the country by now. Why should he care to know about this one? Besides that, I already

know that Olivia inherited the Tay-Sachs gene from him, since I tested negative for it. Why embark on a man-hunt that will only serve to confirm what we already know?" She says this all very matter-of-factly, and I must say, I see her point. I hadn't thought about it in those terms.

"I see your point. I guess I hadn't really thought about it from that angle," I tell her.

Beth nods and continues. "My other reason, not nearly so powerful, is that I have really no idea whether the sperm bank is still in operation or not. I only lived in Seattle briefly, you know."

"Seattle? I didn't know you'd lived in Seattle," I say, surprised.

"I hardly ever mention it because, as I said, I only lived there briefly. It sounded like such a romantic city when I was young, and I wanted to get out of Oklahoma, so I moved.

Unfortunately, it didn't turn out to be nearly so romantic as I had anticipated. It was just another city, really. The best thing that came out of my two years there was Olivia. Soon after she was born, I moved back to Oklahoma. I wanted to be closer to family and friends," Beth explains. "I wanted my parents to know their grandchild."

"Not to press the issue of the sperm bank, but do you remember the name of it?" I ask this hesitantly, afraid she'll think I haven't accepted her decision to leave the donor's identity confidential.

"Malcor Cryogenics Lab, it was called. It frightened me that I was going to a "lab" to have a baby, but it turned out well in the end," Beth says, laughing at the memory. Suddenly, her face sobers. "Really, Lora, I don't want to talk about this anymore. I'm tired and I just need to go home and sleep." With that, she turns abruptly and walks away, leaving me deep in thought.

Home once again, I call Seattle information and ask for an address and phone number for

Nicholas Richard Criswell. I am put on hold and while I wait, I wonder what the chances are that he's still there after all these years. The operator comes back on the line and informs me that they have three listings for Nicholas R. Criswells in the Seattle area--only three? Amazing!--then reads me off the addresses and phone numbers, which I copy down on a sheet of paper. I thank her and hang up, dazed, amazed at how easy that was. Now I've only to figure out which one--if any--is the right one.

I look at the paper again, take a deep breath, and before I have time to think twice, my fingers have dialed the first number. The phone rings one, two, three, four, five times, and I am about to hang up when I hear the click of an answering machine picking up. "I'm not home at the moment," the recorded voice informs me. Nick's voice. A voice I haven't heard in twenty-four years, but I'd know it anywhere. I can't believe I found him with the first call. I hang up quickly, before the "beep" sounds. What I have to say to him cannot be left on an answering machine. I tear off the bottom half of the paper--the half with the two wrong numbers on it--and drop it into the trash. I shove the remaining slip into my pocket.

I go into the den, looking for Martin. I find him sitting at his desk, grading papers. This sight reminds me that I, too, have a stack of finished homework assignments and tests waiting for me. I push thoughts of Nick to the back of my mind and try to focus my mind on the essay test my American Literature students completed last week. I was off last Friday and today because of these blood tests; I feel like I'm falling behind.

I know *The Scarlet Letter* like the back of my hand; these exams should be easy to grade, if only I can concentrate. I sit at my desk, facing Martin, who smiles up at me. He has no conception of the turmoil going on inside me. I focus my mind on Hester Prynne and Arthur

Dimmesdale, and work my way through the exams. Some of my students have incredible insight and I'm very impressed; others seem not to have read the book at all, which is frustrating. As I toss the last exam on the pile, I notice that Martin is still hard at work--I think he's making lesson plans--and it's grown quite dark outside.

I get up from the desk and smile wordlessly at my husband as I pass him on my way to the kitchen. He smiles back but doesn't speak. I take a deep breath, pick up the phone and push the "re-dial" button. I can feel my heart beating like a drum in my chest as the phone rings. I'm scared to talk to him, but at the same time I hope he answers this time. I don't know if I'll have the courage to try a third time.

"Hello?" A breathless voice, unmistakably Nick's, answers after the fourth ring. Oh, God, what do I say? "Is this Nick Criswell?" I ask, stupidly, for I've got to say something or he'll hang up thinking he's received a crank call. Of course it's him, and he tells me so. Deep breath. I tell him who I am--Lora Graffmeyer, a name I haven't been known by for twenty-two years. There is silence on the other end of the line and I wonder if perhaps he has forgotten who I am.

But no, he's simply in shock. "Lora with an 'o'?" he asks me. This is the same question he asked me the day we met, and I know he remembers me. I think I am relieved by this. He asks how I'm doing, how I've been, what I've been up to for the past--what is it?--twenty-four years. He asks the questions in a perfectly normal voice, very friendly, as though it hasn't entered into his mind to wonder why I'm calling him now, when we haven't spoken to or seen each other in nearly two-and-a-half decades. "Well, I'm still teaching freshman and sophomore American and British Literature at Forrest; I'm still living in Indiana; I'm married now." Brief



pause. "And I have a son." I politely inquire after his activities of the past twenty-four years. This is a strange conversation. So natural and normal, and yet so bizarre and surreal. I never would have imagined myself in this situation. Nick tells me he's living in Seattle, obviously, where he's been since he left Indiana. He still plays the guitar and dabbles in sculpture, he's never married, and he owns a small cafe in downtown Seattle. "The cafe," he says, "has enjoyed remarkable success, and I thoroughly enjoy my work."

I ask Nick, "aren't you curious about why I've called you?"

"I figured you'd get around to it," he says, still the laid-back, easygoing guy I remember. He seems unchanged, which is reassuring to me. Maybe it won't be so difficult to break this news to him. I'm thinking about how to begin when his voice breaks into my thoughts. "So why did you call?" he asks, a hint of curiosity entering his voice. Here goes nothing. But wait-- before I get around to telling him that he has a son he knows nothing about, there's something I'm just dying to know. I ask the question that's plagued me for twenty-four years. "Nick, why didn't you ever call me after you got to Washington? You know you promised me you would." There's silence on the other end of the line. Maybe I shouldn't have asked. Just as I'm about to say so, he breaks the silence.

"I'm sorry, Lora," he says, three words which nearly put me into shock. "I did promise to call you, and I should have." I can't believe what I'm hearing! "I got to Washington, and it just wasn't what I'd expected, you know? I'd been really naive: I thought that once I got there, everything would just work out without my doing anything--I'd instantly have a job, an apartment, stuff like that. Then when it didn't, I was first angry, then ashamed. I should have thought more maturely. I was embarrassed to call you and tell you I was a failure. When I

finally got my act together, I called information to get your number, but there were no listings for Lora Graffmeyer. I had no idea if you'd moved away--and if so, where you would have gone--or if you'd married--"

"I am married," I interrupt him. "It's Lora Fleming now." Why do I feel compelled to tell him this? Why should he care? Well, now he knows, anyway.

--either way, I figured you'd moved on with your life and forgotten all about me, so I tried to forget about you." I listen to all of this in silence, but he's not done yet. "I thought about you over the years, you know. Every once in a while I'd find an old letter or smell a scent that reminded me of you, and I'd wonder how you were doing. I did love you, you know."

I hear everything he says, but I'm only processing it with about half of my brain. At any other time, such a speech would cause me to cry buckets, but right now I'm too focused on the problems my family is facing. I thank Nick for being honest with me and tell him that his kind words have touched me. "You know, that's not why I called at all. I need to talk with you," I continue, "but I'm having trouble saying what I need to over the phone. I'd like to fly out to Washington with my family and see you," I say, improvising. This idea has just hit me. The worst he can do is refuse me, I think.

He doesn't. His response surprises me, though. "I would love to see you again, and meet your family, but why don't I come to Indiana?" he asks. "I haven't been back since I left. Besides, it would probably be easier on you--you wouldn't have to pack up the whole family." I'm astounded. All I have to do is mention that I need to talk to him and he offers to fly across the country to see me? What's that about?

He's right; it would be easier on me if he came out here. It would also be easier not to

have to explain to Caleb why I want he and Olivia to pack up their baby daughter and go to Washington with me to visit a man they've never met. I thank Nick for his offer and agree with him that it would be much easier for me. "Why don't you plan to come on Tuesday, if that's not too soon. That will give me time to speak with my family before you arrive." I am taking a family medical leave of absence from work, I've already decided. Nick promises to fax me his flight plans and says goodbye. That was frighteningly easy. What kind of man flies across the country on a whim, to visit an ex-girlfriend he's had no communication with for the past two and a half decades? I certainly don't know, but I'm not going to worry about it. I've got more important things on my mind right now.

I quickly call my principal at home and outline the situation for him. He knows Clara is ill; it shouldn't come as a shock that complications have arisen. I neglect to mention that these are personal, not medical, complications. I tell him I need at least a week, maybe more, off of work, starting Monday. "I won't be able to concentrate until everything is settled," I conclude. He's a sympathetic man, and he immediately tells me to take as much time as I need.

I drop the receiver back onto the cradle and slide down the wall until I'm sitting on the floor with my knees drawn up to my chest. Now that it's done, I don't know that I feel any better than I did before. What if I haven't done the right thing? I close my eyes and drop my forehead down to rest on my knees. This is where Martin finds me when he comes into the kitchen sometime later. I am still half asleep when he picks me up--something he hasn't done since we were first married--and carries me into the bedroom. He lays me down gently and covers me with a blanket. "Wait, I need to talk to you," I mumble to him, but he turns out the light and leaves. Later, I wake up long enough to switch my clothes for pyjamas, and climb back into bed.

I wake up the next morning, Saturday, blissfully refreshed. I'm glad Martin ignored me last night when I told him I needed to talk. My head feels clearer now, and I am alert; I must decide what I am going to say to Martin and Caleb. I'll talk to Martin first, I think, because he at least knows that Nick exists. May as well tackle the day head-first, I tell myself as I climb out of bed. Martin is in the kitchen, looking at the newspaper and drinking coffee. "I thought I'd let you sleep," he tells me. "You've had a rough few weeks." As if he hasn't! Men.

"Thanks," I say to him. "I think I needed it. I feel better this morning, though." I make myself a cup of tea and join him at the kitchen table. Should I pick up a section of the paper and start reading while I wait for him to ask what happened last night? Or should I just tell him straight out? A direct approach is best, I think. "Martin, I really need to talk to you," I say in a very serious voice. He puts down his newspaper and looks at me expectantly. Where do I begin?

"I called Nick Criswell last night," I say. "I called information in Seattle and got his phone number," I explain, "and I've asked him to come out here."

Martin stares at me, astonished. "You did what? Invited him here? Why? Did you tell him about Caleb?"

"No, I didn't. I wanted to, but I just couldn't do it over the phone. That's why I asked him to fly out here." Better not to even mention the fact that I suggested *we go there*.

"Lora, how could you do that without consulting me, without even mentioning the idea to me first?"

"Well," I say slowly, "I knew you would tell me not to call him, and I also knew that I had to. So I just did it. He'll be here on Tuesday," I say firmly, "so you'd better get used to the idea." I can't believe those words just came out of my mouth. I've never in my life spoken to

Martin like that. He stares piercingly at me for a moment, then storms out of the room. I guess he's not going to get used to the idea. I continue to sit at the table, catching my breath and regaining my composure. I've still got to talk to Caleb yet today. Nick will be here in three days.

I pick up the telephone and dial my son's phone number, thinking I must be insane to want to talk to him after the fiasco that was my conversation with Martin. You do what you have to do, I guess. Olivia answers, and I ask about Clara. "She seems OK," Olivia tells me, "no real change. She's not getting any better, but doesn't seem to be getting worse, either." I then ask Olivia how *she* is holding up, and the answer is not so optimistic. "Not so well, actually," she admits. "This is so hard. I never imagined being a mother would be so difficult. You're lucky," she says wistfully. "Your baby was healthy." I don't know what to say, so I say nothing. I wish she were not so quick to pin me with the label of 'lucky.' "Well, I'll get Caleb for you," she says, and hurries to do so.

When he comes on the line, I ask him what his plans are for the day. "I really haven't planned anything," he says. "I thought I might try to get some papers graded this afternoon." This surprises me--surely he's not planning to work this next week! As though reading my mind, he says "I'm not teaching next week, but I should really get this stuff done for the sub. I've had these papers forever. These past weeks have been so hectic, I couldn't concentrate on anything besides Clara, you know?" Yeah, I know. "Anyway, Mom, why do you ask?"

"I really need to talk to you, Caleb," I say to him, repeating almost exactly what I said to Martin just this morning. "I was wondering if you'd come over for a while this afternoon." Caleb doesn't say anything for a moment.

"Is this really important, Mom? I'd really like to be with Olivia and Clara. Can't you

come over here?"

"I understand, Caleb, but yes, it's important. I wouldn't ask you to be away from your family at a time like this unless it was," I say to him. "I'd prefer to talk to you alone. Olivia is under a lot of stress; she doesn't need me to add to that," I explain, though it's quite a flimsy excuse. Eventually, Olivia will have to know everything, but today, this is between my son and me.

"I had a feeling you'd say that. Your voice sounds ominous. I'll be there. What time?" I sigh with relief, now that he's agreed to come over.

"Anytime this afternoon is fine; why don't you come after lunch?" I figure this will give me plenty of time to shower and eat, as well as psych myself up mentally. This is not going to be an easy conversation. Hey, if I'm feeling good I may even try talking to Martin again. It would certainly help to have him with me when I talk to Caleb. He's got almost as much to explain as I do.

"That's fine," Caleb says. "I'll probably be there about two." He hangs up the phone. Time to start assembling my visual aids. I poke my head into the den before walking all the way in. Martin's not there. I'm not sure where he is, actually, but I think I may have heard the front door open and shut while I was talking to Caleb. Perhaps he's out walking, calming himself down. I'm not overly worried; I'm sure he'll be back. For the moment, it's actually kind of nice to have the house to myself. The solitude will give me time to think. I have absolutely no idea what I'm going to say to Caleb when he walks through that front door. No idea.

I open the bottom drawer of my desk and hunt around until I find the keyring I'm looking for. One key opens our safe; I'll save that for later. The other opens the locked drawer of my file

cabinet, and it's this key that I use now. I unlock the drawer and pull it out, exposing what's inside: a battered cardboard box brimming with papers, letters, pictures, and mementos. I haven't opened this box in years, and I have a feeling it's going to be terribly painful to look inside now.

I open the lid of the box and am greeted by a picture of me, about seven months pregnant, standing next to my sister Lily. It's still strange for me to look at that picture of us. We look so very different. We've been identical twins all of our lives; it was weird for me to look at Lily and not see a reflection of myself. Under that are several pictures of me at the baby shower my mother and Lily threw for me. Man, was that a surprise. I thought then, and I still think now, that it was all Lily's idea. My mother wasn't exactly thrilled when she found out I was pregnant. "So you're pregnant and the guy's run off," she said to me when I finally found the courage to break the news to her. I didn't attempt to correct her implication that Nick had run off because I was pregnant. It wouldn't have done any good--she's always been one to believe what she wants to, no matter the facts.

Needless to say, she was all for me giving "the baby" up for adoption. When I'd first mentioned that maybe I'd keep the baby, she'd been horrified. "Surely you don't mean that? If you keep this baby, you'll never be able to find a man who'll marry you." What she didn't realize was, *I didn't care!* Fresh from the breakup with Nick, finding another boyfriend was the last thing on my mind. All men could go to hell as far as I was concerned. I wanted this baby, though. The more I thought about it, the more convinced I became, and nothing could change my mind.

Lily was on my side from the beginning--I told her about my pregnancy before I told my

these cards won't interest Caleb very much, but they *are* part of his history, and he deserves to see them.

As I place the cards and pictures on the "show Caleb" stack, I hear the phone ringing in the kitchen. I haven't heard the door open again; I don't think Martin has come home yet. The phone rings a fourth time, and I jump up from the floor to answer it. I catch it on the sixth ring and gasp "hello?" to the person on the other end of the line.

"Lora? What, were you outside or something? It rang *six* times before you answered. I was about ready to hang up." Lily. I should have known it would be her. She's always been able to sense, even from afar, when something was bothering me. Actually, I can do the same with her. It must be a twin thing.

"No, I was in the den," I tell her, not elaborating.

"If you're busy I won't keep you. I was just calling to see how your life was going." I haven't talked with her since Caleb and Olivia decided about this whole genetic history thing. Now that I think about it, though, I'm surprised he didn't ask Lily and Jon to be tested, too--or at least Jon. Lily and I, being twins, have the same genetic material. "Lora?" Lily's voice breaks into my thoughts. "Is everything OK? You seem very distracted."

"No, Lily, everything is not OK. Caleb and Olivia are thinking of having another baby."

"What's wrong with that? Are they worried it'll be sick like Clara?" she asks. "Lora, you don't have anything to worry about yet. Wait until the baby is born before you get yourself all worked up."

"They *are* worried a new baby would have Tay-Sachs like Clara, so Caleb wanted to get a whole family genetic history before they decided whether or not to get pregnant. We went to a



geneticist, and he analyzed blood from Caleb, Olivia, Beth, Martin, and me.”

“What did they find out?” Lily asks, her concern evident in her voice.

“They found out Martin and I don’t have the Tay-Sachs gene.” The words hang heavily in the air as I wait for Lily to grasp their meaning.

“You don’t have and it Martin doesn’t have it, so where did Caleb...oh. This is about Nick, isn’t it? My God, Lora, what are you going to do?”

“I called him,” I say simply. “I crossed my fingers, called Seattle information, took down the numbers they gave me and dialed. Then I said ‘hey, I need to tell you something, but not over the phone’ and then I asked him if I could come--with the family--and visit him. He suggested that he come here; he’ll be here on Tuesday.” I explain this to my sister in a cool, almost detached voice. I feel as if all emotion has left my body; if I get emotional now, I’ll be a wreck for the next week. I’ve got to hold everything inside or risk falling apart.

“Wow. I’m amazed at you. I can’t believe you just called him and invited him out here like that. Did you tell Martin and Caleb?”

“I talked to Martin this morning,” I begin. “He was angry that I acted without consulting him. He yelled at me, then he walked out. He hasn’t come back yet.”

“Oh, Lora,” Lily says, sympathetically.

“I’m going to talk to Caleb this afternoon. In fact, when you called, I was sorting through the box of baby pictures and letters in the den. That’s why it took me so long to get to the phone,” I explain.

“I’ll let you go, then. I hope it goes well this afternoon. Call me if you need anything,” she instructs me. I’m glad my entire family hasn’t abandoned me. I hang up the phone and want

to curl up into a little ball and disappear. Unfortunately, that's not an option. I've got to finish going through that box.

I drift back into the den and find pictures scattered on the floor where I've left them. The box is still three-quarters full. I pick quickly through scattered other baby pictures of Caleb that I've kept hidden. There are few; most of the pictures I took while he was an infant were of him alone--or later, him with Martin--and they're in an album that sits on a shelf here in the den. Caleb has seen all of those, multiple times.

Here are the letters and cards from Nick. They occupy most of the rest of the space in the box. They're stacked up and tied with a yellow ribbon--a ribbon that, if I recall correctly, was tied around a bouquet of roses he gave me. The stack is thin--he didn't write me many letters, though he was quite the romantic. I shift the packet of letters from hand to hand, debating whether or not I want to untie the ribbon. I know if I read one letter, I'll have to read them all. That could take all afternoon, nevermind that Caleb will be here in slightly under an hour. I think better of reading the letters and set them aside. I *do* want to look at them before I see Nick again (although, actually, that may not be the best idea I've ever had), but I simply don't have the time today.

Underneath the packet of letters are pictures. I dated Nick for almost two years, and in that time more than a few pictures were taken of us together. There are also the studio pictures, pictures that I insisted we have done, but which I probably wouldn't have been so adamant about had I known he would leave three weeks later. I haven't looked at these in years. Really, years. The last time I had this box out...I think I pulled Caleb's baby pictures and things out right after he left for college, but I left the rest of the box untouched. I actually can't recall the last time I

looked at the pictures of Nick and me.

I am thumbing through them slowly, remembering days I thought I'd forgotten, when I hear the front door opening. Martin's back. This should be interesting. I steel myself for another confrontation, drop the pictures back into the box, and walk out of the den. Martin is standing in the entryway, and his gaze stops on me as I come out of the den. I stare back at him, the silence heavy in the air between us.

"I'm sorry," he begins. "I should not have been so harsh with you without first thinking about what you were saying." The words sound rehearsed, as though he's practiced them before saying them to me.

"You've thought about it now, I suppose?" I ask. The words come out sounding much more sarcastic than I had intended.

"Yes, yes, I have," he affirms. I look at him expectantly, wondering what his conclusion will be. "I think," he begins slowly, "that you were right: I would have told you--asked you--not to call. Why involve Nick Criswell in our family's problems? We can solve this without him," he finishes in a pleading voice. I understand the sentiment behind the words, but it's foolish to actually believe them.

"Martin, do you realize what you're saying? Nick is *Caleb's father*. He is involved already, whether we want him to be or not," I say, trying to explain my rationale behind calling Nick. Then, "Actually, I don't think it really matters. What's done is done. I called him and he'll be here in three days, whether I was right to call or not, and whether you want him to come or not. It's done, Martin."

"Let's just call a truce then. I just don't want to discuss it." A truce? I don't think I've

called a truce with anyone since grade school. But if it will give us some sense of normalcy...

“So we won’t discuss it, then,” I say in a firm voice, and then more tentatively, “are we OK?” We’ve fought before--every couple fights, right--but he’s never walked out on me before.

Martin quickly covers the distance between us--during our whole conversation, neither of us had moved--and wraps his arms around me. “Of course we’re OK. I didn’t mean for this to get personal, and I shouldn’t have attacked you. I really am sorry.” His words are comforting, reassuring. They give me the courage to drop the next bit of news at his feet.

“Caleb will be here in about half an hour,” I say. “Are you going to help me talk to him?”

Martin recoils from me as though I’d slapped him. “What, exactly, are you going to talk to him about?” he asks, sounding accusatory once again. I thought we’d put the anger on hold, called a truce, decided not to make accusations. Apparently I thought wrong.

No need to beat around the bush, I think. “Well, it seems the time has come that he know the truth about his family. He deserves an explanation about how he came to inherit something that neither you nor I have. Nick will be here soon--” at this, a pained expression crosses Martin’s face again. I pretend not to see it and continue, “--and I think Caleb should know why. I never thought it would come to this, never hoped that it would. When we decided about Caleb twenty-two years ago, this is not what I wanted. I hope you understand that. But now, with things starting to come out in the open, he’s bound to have questions, and I’m going to provide him with the answers. I can’t keep this hidden any longer. To do so would only cause more pain.”

Martin stands silent, staring intently at me as though pondering my words. I can almost look inside his head and see him weighing each word. I know he suspects I have a hidden

agenda, and I think I would not be off base to say he fears I will attempt to place all of the blame on him. I'll say honestly that I've thought about it. I can't do it, though. I love my husband too much for that.

"I hope that you can accept my decision. I am sorry if you feel that I've irrevocably changed our lives without consulting you. I don't blame you for feeling slighted." I try to explain to Martin what I'm feeling, but the words fail me. I have no idea what to say, so I abruptly stop talking and wait for his response.

"I do want to talk to Caleb with you. Please call me when he gets here," Martin says in a very quiet voice, then turns and walks into the bedroom.

I've tried very hard to remain calm and collected these past few days--succeeding more on some days than others--but this breakdown of my family scares me to death. I have absolutely no idea how Caleb is going to react to what I tell him this afternoon, and I'm worried. I'd like to think that he'll be understanding and forgiving, but common sense tells me he'll be angry and upset. I don't have time to think about this, I tell myself, glancing at my watch.

I hurry back into the den and sit down before the box once again. I pick up the stack of pictures that I tossed in the box when Martin came in and put them with the other things that I want to show Caleb. I return the letters to the box, and return the box to the file cabinet. The last thing I want is Caleb's birth certificate, which is locked in our safe.

The necessary items are finally assembled, and I have about fifteen minutes to sit and think about what I'm going to say to my son when he walks in the door. I drop the stack of paper and pictures on the coffee table in the family room and curl up on the couch. What to say, what to say? "Hi, honey, how are you? Did you know your dad isn't really your dad?" No, that won't

do. "Guess what, son? I've been lying to you for almost twenty-four years!" No. I can't use that either. Why didn't I give myself more time to think about this? I know what will happen. He'll get here, and I won't know what to say, so I'll blurt out the first thing that comes to mind, which will be along the lines of "guess what? Everything you know about your family is a lie!" This is a catastrophe. Certain disaster.

I squeeze my eyes shut and clamp my hands over my face, then sit motionless on the couch, hoping a flash of brilliance will strike me. I'm surprised someone hasn't written a self-help book for this situation. They have books for everything else, it seems. My mind takes this self-help thought and runs with it, only to be stopped by the sound of the front door opening. I know it's Caleb, and here I haven't thought of a single good way to give him this terrible news.

I drag myself off the couch and make my way towards the front door, pausing to call to Martin that Caleb has arrived. I can hear him moving around in the bedroom; I assume he heard the front door open, too. Why didn't I go talk to him? Maybe between the two of us we could have come up with something to say.

"Hello, Caleb, Sweetheart. How are you?" He looks tired; his eyes are the slightest bit puffy and red. He looks up from untying his shoes and shrugs.

"As well as can be expected, I guess," he says. It's a response that makes me feel terrible. Lord knows I'm not going to do anything to make him feel better. In fact, I'm fairly certain that I'm just going to make him feel worse. Mothers have a difficult job. Especially lying mothers.

I turn and Caleb follows me into the family room, where Martin is already seated on the couch. I resume my position at the opposite end of the couch, near the pile of "visual aids." I don't know where to begin, what to say...

“So what’s this all about, anyway?” Caleb asks, skipping any pretense of small talk. He’s eager to get back to his family. Martin and I glance at each other; his look says “go ahead, this was your idea.” Right. My idea.

“Caleb, your father and I haven’t been completely honest with you,” I begin, recalling words that Martin said to me twenty-two years ago. Caleb says nothing, but stares expectantly at me, waiting. Deep breath. “When I was twenty-two and had just graduated from college, I met Nicholas Criswell. We became very good friends and started dating. We’d been together for a year and a half when he decided that he was tired of living in the Midwest and wanted to move to Seattle--”

“This is all very interesting, Mom, but what does it have to do with me?” Caleb’s face shows confusion and impatience.

“Please, Caleb, just listen,” I implore him. Where was I? “So Nick told me that he was moving to Seattle, and three days later he was gone. I was very upset. It broke my heart, really. I was very much in love with Nick, and before he left, I’d been certain that he would ask me to marry him.” I’ve been staring down at my hands while reciting this information, and now I glance up at Caleb. His expression is a mixture of compassion and confusion.

“The month after Nick left dragged by; I felt queasy and tired, and generally not myself. At first, I thought I was suffering from depression or a virus, but then I began to think it was something else. I went to the doctor, and he told me I was pregnant.” I make direct eye contact with my son as I say these words. “I was pregnant--with you.”

His mouth is slightly agape, and he’s staring at me with a look of utter disbelief. I pluck his birth certificate from the coffee table and hand it to him. He holds it at arms length for a

moment before drawing it closer and dropping his eyes down to look at it. Without warning, Caleb stands up and walks over to the window. His back to Martin and I, he asks “So what are you saying, Mom? This guy Nick is my father?”

“Yes, Caleb, that’s what I’m telling you,” I reply in a quiet voice. “Nick Criswell is your father. The tests were not mistaken; you inherited this Tay-Sachs gene from Nick.”

“This birth certificate says Graffmeyer,” Caleb says, still staring out the window. “Where did Fleming come from?” He half turns; I can see his profile. “I know Dad--” at the word, a grimace of pain crosses his face and he turns back to the window, silent again.

To my surprise, Martin begins to explain. “Caleb, I met your mother at a cross country meet when you were four months old. We dated for about a year, and that whole time the three of us did things as a family. As the weeks and months passed, I began to feel more and more like a father to you. I realized that the genetic aspect made no difference--Nick may have helped conceive you, but he wasn’t around; didn’t know you existed. I wanted to adopt you; I wanted you to truly, legally be my son. In my heart, you already were. I know that sounds corny, but it’s absolutely true. Your mom and I agreed that you were so young--not even a year and a half old--that you wouldn’t be able to remember when I wasn’t around. There was no reason for you to know that I wasn’t your natural father. We just wanted you to have a normal family. We wanted what was best for you” Martin’s voice dies down to a whisper. “We wanted you to be happy.”

Caleb returns to his chair and slumps down in it. “You lied to me!” he says in an anguished voice. “I don’t even know who I am anymore.” He buries his face in his hands, and I see tears running down his cheeks. This is breaking my heart in half. This is my son, who I wouldn’t hurt for anything in the world, and here I am, beating him when he’s down, hurting him



more than I ever have before. I would've given anything to have been able to avoid this.

Perhaps I should say as much to Caleb.

"Caleb, you understand why we're telling you this now, don't you?" I ask. He doesn't speak, but raises his head. "I had to offer you some explanation about those tests results." Caleb nods without speaking. Should I let him sit there, lost in his own thoughts, or should I talk to him? I've never done this before; I don't know. I want to go over and comfort him, but I have a feeling he would push me away. I wouldn't blame him. After all, it is because of me that he is so upset.

I move closer to Martin and rest my head on his shoulder. Angry or not, I need him right now. We sit in this position, each drawing comfort from the closeness of the other, until Caleb finishes crying. With one hand he wipes the tears from his face as he focuses his gaze on us. Earlier, he tossed his birth certificate back onto the coffee table, and he now looks at it. "What's the rest of that stuff?" he asks quietly.

I raise my head from Martin's shoulder and move slowly towards the coffee table. "There are some baby pictures of you," I say to Caleb, picking up some of the loose pictures and offering them to him. "Here's your baby book, some cards that my friends and family sent us in the hospital when you were born, and then there are some pictures of Nick." I pick up the items as I name them off and scatter them across the table for Caleb to see.

Suddenly, I have an idea. "Caleb, why don't you take these things home with you," I suggest. "I know you'll want to take your time looking at them, and maybe you'll want to show some of them to Olivia." Somehow, I think it will be less painful for him to look at them alone, in his own house, without Martin and I staring at him and watching for a reaction. Caleb nods

and gathers up the pictures and cards, stacking them neatly in a pile.

He is standing at the front door, stack of pictures and cards beneath one arm, when I realize that there I something I have forgotten to mention. "Caleb--" I lay one hand on his arm, unthinking, and he flinches. I reflexively pull my hand away and step backwards. "You need to know that I've talked with Nick, and he's flying out here--from Washington--on Tuesday. I know it's a lot to ask of you, I know you're angry and confused, but I'd like for you to be here." He says nothing; continues to stare out the front door. "Please, Caleb, think about it. It would mean a lot to me, and I'm sure to him, too."

"Can I go now?" he asks, still refusing to look at Martin or me.

"Of course you can go; we're not holding you prisoner!" I say, trying to make light of the situation. Then more seriously, "Caleb, call me after you've looked through those pictures and things. Whatever you might be thinking right now, I do love you. I hate that I am hurting you, and I'll do anything that I can to make this less painful for you." I want to say more, but I don't know what, and so I leave it at that.

He pushes the screen door open and walks slowly out to his car, looking abandoned and friendless. I can't believe I've done this to him. As I watch him get in his car and drive away, I am hit by an overwhelming sense of sadness. I hope that I've done the right thing--finally--by telling him the truth.

All of this stress, arguing, and crying has taken its toll on me. After Caleb leaves, I'm exhausted. I crawl into bed, even though it's the middle of the afternoon, and sleep straight through until Sunday morning. I wake up feeling physically refreshed but still mentally beaten.

I spend the afternoon reading through Nick's few letters. They've been calling to me ever

since I ran across them yesterday afternoon. Curled up in the chair in the den, I read them, one by one. Fastidious person that I am, I long ago arranged them chronologically.

As I fold the final letter and slip it back into the envelope, a strange mix of emotions washes over me. I feel almost as though I were reading about someone else; prying into a stranger's romance. I haven't looked at these letters or really thought about Nick--in a romantic sense--in such a long time, it seems unreal that these letters belong to me. At the same time, I am saddened again that this chapter of my life is closed.

I retie the ribbon around the letters and let them slide to the floor. I stay curled in the chair, reliving old memories, until Martin opens the door and calls me for dinner. I follow him into the kitchen and notice that the whole house smells wonderful. Lost in my own world, I hadn't even noticed. Dinner is excellent. Martin considered being a chef before he decided to be a teacher, and with good reason. He is a superb cook. He tends to cook up a storm when he's agitated or upset--which, when I first met him, I thought was really strange for a man. I've grown accustomed to it, though.

He suggests a movie to take our minds off of our family problems. I agree without hesitation. A diversion would be welcome at this point. I need to get out of the house, and I'm sure Martin feels the same way. We spend a relaxed, amiable evening together, carefully avoiding any mention of Caleb and Olivia or Nick Criswell.

When we finally crawl into bed later that night, I feel considerably calmer than I've felt at any point during the past few weeks. "Thank you for tonight," I whisper, curling up to Martin. I sleep soundly, feeling that everything is going to work out eventually.

Monday passes fairly uneventfully, thank goodness. I sleep in until ten-thirty--this whole business of "getting it off my chest" is exhausting! I wake up feeling surprisingly alert and refreshed, and so after lunch I drive myself to James P. Forrest High School and slip stealthily in through the front doors, making a beeline for the administration offices. I speak briefly with Principal Norman Edwidge (--his name always, *always* makes me think of "earwig." I can't seem to help it. On my sillier days, it's sometimes all I can do not to picture his head on the body of that insect--), then head for my classroom.

Marian Dant, who is substituting for me all this week, is pulling her lunch from under my desk when I arrive. "Hi, Marian," I say, striding across the room towards her. She looks up in surprise, then moves out of my way as she realizes I'm heading towards the stack of tests and compositions stacked on the windowsill directly behind her. "I just wanted to pick up some of this stuff so that I can at least make a stab at grading it this week. I feel like I'm falling so far behind," I explain, hefting the stack and shoving it into my briefcase. Though I've only missed a day and a half so far (not counting last Friday), it feels like much more.

"I really wasn't expecting to see you this week," Marian says, her face still holding a look of surprise. "Norm said you were having some pretty serious family difficulties," she continues in a voice that leads me to believe she thinks I'm lying. Her eyes bore holes into me as she waits for a response.

"Yes, my granddaughter is very sick," I say simply, snapping my briefcase shut. I pick it up from the windowsill--now several pounds heavier than before--and turn to leave. "Thank you for taking my classes this week. I appreciate it," I say to Marian over my shoulder. We may have our personal difficulties (that is, she hates me for no apparent reason), but she *is* a

competent teacher, and I know from what Norman said that she's been following my lesson plans. Besides, the last thing I want today is another argument.

"You're welcome," I hear her say as I walk out the door. I pause. "I'm sorry about your granddaughter," she continues, coming out the door behind me. She follows me to the fork in the hallway; I head towards the front door while she goes to the teachers' lounge.

Home, I find Martin gone, and a brief note indicating that he had the same idea as me; he's gone to pick up assignments his students have turned in. Well, while he's gone and the house is so quiet, I may as well try to grade some of these compositions and tests.

Uninterrupted, I grade straight through the afternoon and early evening. I find that having something other than the problems of my family to occupy my mind helps. Time passes quickly, and it's not until I stop grading, realizing I'm quite hungry and it's grown quite dark, that I notice Martin has yet to return. I walk through the house, flipping on lights as I go, wondering where my husband could be.

It's strange. I'm worried about him, and yet I'm not. This week--has it really been only a week?--has been so strange and disconnected that I feel as though nothing more can happen that will surprise, shock, or astound me. I've lived through it all. That's not true, Lora, says a little voice in the back of my brain, a little voice that sounds like Nick Criswell. The little voice is right. Caleb hasn't called me back, Martin is barely speaking to me, and Nick will be here tomorrow.

I fix myself a sandwich and settle on the couch to watch the news. It's long over and my sandwich reduced to crumbs when the front door opens and Martin comes in, calling to me as he shuts the door. "Where have you been?" I ask, more curious than accusatory or angry.

“I should have called,” he says, taking off first one shoe and then the other and letting them fall to the floor. “I felt bad for neglecting the guys; I ran some laps with my cross country runners.” Looking at him, I notice that his hair is, in fact, damp, and his shirt is stuck to his body. It’s a look I find sexy and appealing, but I’m not in the mood.

“Go shower,” I say, shoving him gently. “I’ll fix you something to eat.” We spend the rest of the night in each other’s company, each relating what happened at our respective schools, then watching some mindless television programming. The events of the past few days have taken their toll on both of us. Tired, we decide to go to bed early.

Laying there in bed, next to Martin, I find that while my body wants to sleep my mind is running along at full speed. Caleb never called. I wonder what that means. Does he have nothing to say to me? Was he too busy with Clara to even look at the pictures and things? Does he hate me? Should I have called him? Would he have spoken to me if I *had* called? Is he going to come over tomorrow and meet Nick?

Oh, God, Nick’s coming tomorrow. That is going to be such a mess. Why did I ever call and talk to him before I talked to Caleb and Martin? What in the world made me think I could solve these twenty-two year old problems myself? I must be severely disturbed, that’s the only answer I can think of.

“Martin? Are you awake?” I whisper, rolling over to touch his back. He hasn’t said a word since we came to bed, and I have no idea how long I’ve been laying here, wide-awake, mind wandering. “Martin? Honey, are you awake?”

“What is it, Lora?” He turns around to face me, eyes squinty. I know I’ve woken him up. I scoot closer and wrap my arms around him, burying my face in his chest. “Lora, what’s

wrong?” He wraps his arms around me, hugging me tightly to him. It feels so wonderful, so safe, that I don’t ever want to move. If I could just stay right here, forever, everything would be fine. But everything’s not going to be fine. I pull out of his embrace, sitting up abruptly. “Martin, you know Nick is coming tomorrow, right? What are we going to do? Caleb never called me today. I think I’ve ruined our family.” Martin reaches for me as tears begin to roll down my face.

“Don’t worry about it tonight; there’s nothing you can do. We’ll talk about it tomorrow, before he gets here. Why don’t you try to get some sleep? It might make you feel better. We’ll be OK, Lora.” He lays back on the bed, gently pulling me with him. He’s right; I should sleep. This is not a major revelation. I’m exhausted, and I know it. I reach to the clock radio and turn on some quiet classical music, hoping it will soothe me, then settle myself once again against Martin. I’ll get some sleep and things will look better in the morning.

I wake to sun streaming in the windows and find that Martin is no longer beside me. A glance at my clock shows that it’s nearly eleven. Eleven! That gives me only three hours until Nick arrives. I have so much to do. I jump out of bed, throw on my robe and race into the kitchen. Through the back door I see Martin, showered and dressed, sitting on the porch drinking his coffee. “How come you let me sleep so late?” I ask, opening the door wide enough to stick my head out.

“You were tired; you needed the sleep,” he says simply. “Come sit with me,” he invites, indicating the empty chair next to him. I pour myself a glass of orange juice and join him on the porch. “You want to tell me what’s happening this afternoon?” Martin asks without preamble

once I'm settled in the chair.

"What do you mean?" From the tone of his voice I cannot tell whether he is angry or curious.

"You invited Nick out here--why?"

That's a good question, I think to myself. When I talked to Nick on the phone the other night, I had invited myself out to visit him. When he turned the invitation around and invited himself out here, I agreed, but I guess I didn't really think about why. What am I going to do this afternoon when he gets here? What will I say to him after all these years? Well, obviously I need to tell him about Caleb.

"Lora--" Martin's voice interrupts my thoughts. "What's going on?"

"Oh, I don't know. I knew when I called that I wanted to tell him about Caleb, and I thought it would be a good idea for Caleb to see him. But I couldn't say something like that over the phone..."

"So you asked him to come here."

"Right. I told him to come." On and on the conversation goes. I try to explain to Martin what was going through my mind when I talked to Nick, but it's rough going. He doesn't understand. He doesn't realize that I need to reconcile these events from my past--for my own sake, if not for anyone else's. Selfish, yes, but I can't help how I feel. After an hour of fruitless explanation, I give up. "Whether you understand or not, Nick *will* be here in about two hours. Hopefully Caleb and Olivia, too. I need to shower before then," I say with finality, standing up.

I put my juice glass in the kitchen sink, and walk through the kitchen. As I pass by the telephone, I pause. I should call Caleb. Without hesitating, I pick up the phone and dial his



number; he answers on the first ring. "Hello, Caleb. I was just wondering if you'd had a chance to look through the pictures and things that I gave you Saturday," I say in a quiet voice. A long silence follows, but I hear background noise coming through the phone and I know he hasn't hung up on me. "Caleb?"

"Yeah. Yeah, I looked through them." He doesn't elaborate.

"And...?"

"And what?" he asks sharply. "You lied to me; you've been lying to me my whole life. What else do you want me to say?" While the violence of his reaction startles me, it does not surprise me. I anticipated that he would be angry, and I think his anger is justified, though I would have been happier were he not so upset.

"I know that you are hurt and upset and angry, Caleb. You have every right to be. Yes, I lied to you and your father--Martin--lied to you. Please understand, though, that we thought we were acting in your best interest." I try to keep my voice calm and soothing, but it's difficult. I want to break down crying, but I feel like I have to be strong for Caleb.

"My best interest. Right," he says, sarcastically. "If it weren't for Clara's being sick, would you ever have told me?"

"No," I say honestly. "We wouldn't have."

Again, there is lengthy silence on Caleb's end. I wait, hoping he'll speak up first this time. "Listen, Mom, I don't really want to talk about this now. I can't, OK? I just can't."

"Fine, Caleb, all right. When you're ready to talk, I'm here," I assure him. "Nick will be here this afternoon," I remind him. "Were you planning to come over?" The question comes out very solicitous and polite; I sound like I'm talking to a casual acquaintance, not my son, and

about a far less serious topic.

"I don't know. I'm trying not to think about it."

"Well, he'll be here at two, whatever you decide." I bid my son goodbye and hang up. I hope that a nice hot shower will do something to ease my tension. It still hasn't really sunk in that I've wrecked my son's life. It's strange...you'd think I would be blaming Martin, and yet I put all of the blame on myself. I wonder why that is? I think I need therapy. Maybe when things calm down I'll find myself a good psychologist.

It's a quarter before two and I'm pacing the family room floor. It seems like I've done a lot of pacing the past few days. As I walk back and forth across the room, I think of the day Clara was born. I was pacing then, too. That night, however, it was nervous excitement--joyful nervous excitement--that had me walking the floor. This afternoon I pace with trepidation. All problems with Martin and Caleb aside, *Nick Criswell will be in my house in less than half an hour!* This is a man I haven't seen in *twenty-four* years, a man who made me cry for weeks the last time I saw him. How can I feel anything but anxiety?

Back and forth I pace. Martin is in the den. He's decided not to wait with me. I can understand how this might be painful for him, the fact that I've invited an ex-boyfriend--one that I was obviously quite intimate with, given the fact that we have a child together--into our house without his consent. But he can't honestly think that I still have *feelings* for Nick, can he? I mean, that's ridiculous. I don't. I know I never got closure, never got to really tell him goodbye, but that doesn't mean I never got over him.

I haven't even thought about him in *years*. Really, years. So twenty-four years ago I

thought he was going to propose to me. So I would have said yes, would have followed him to the ends of the earth if he'd asked. So what? That doesn't mean I still would. He abandoned me, left me alone, ignored me. Why would I still have feelings for him? I pace faster, more furious, as I think these thoughts. Ridiculous! How did my mind even get to this topic?

I'm working myself into a veritable frenzy. Think about something else, anything else. The doorbell rings. Think about *he's here! Oh my God, he's here*. It rings again; I didn't imagine it the first time. Martin calls from the den "are you going to get that?" Am I going to get it? Can I? Must I? I stand stock-still in the middle of the room, debating, for what seems like hours. Finally, I take a deep breath, compose myself and walk towards the door. I open it slowly, calmly--

"Hi Mrs. Fleming! Here are you Girl Scout cookies," a childish voice cries before the door is opened all the way. Girl Scout cookies! I think my heart has stopped beating. All that debating and composing for nothing. It's just my neighbor's daughter. I pull myself together enough to ask how much I owe her, then fish the money from my purse. She turns to leave and I'm about to close the door when an unfamiliar blue car turns in to my driveway.

He's here and the door is open and I can't hide. I'm not ready for this. I need more time to think. What am I even going to say to him? My knees feel weak. I set the cookies on the floor and grip the doorframe with one hand and the door with the other, steadying myself. The car backs up and speeds off in the same direction from which it came. I feel like screaming. I am seriously going to have an honest-to-goodness mental breakdown if this happens one more time.

I close the door quickly, and retreat into the family room. Martin has come out of the den

and looks up in surprise when I come in alone. “Where is he?”

“Girl Scout cookies,” I say in response, holding up the boxes for him to view.

“But I heard a car,” he says, clearly confused.

“Turning around,” I explain. At that moment, we hear the sound of another car pulling into the drive. “That must be him,” I say uncertainly. I stand on wobbly legs and walk to the door. Another unfamiliar car, this one green, is sitting in my drive, a man at the wheel. Hiding behind the door like a coward, I peer out the tiny window.

The driver’s door swings open and a man steps out. It’s Nick, I can tell just by looking. I feel like sinking to the floor. This is worse than going to the dentist. And I did it to myself, voluntarily, by inviting him here. What was I thinking? My time to wonder is through, because he’s standing on the front porch. I swing the door open before he has a chance to hit the doorbell.

“Lora, it’s so good to see you,” he cries exuberantly, and reaches to hug me. Well, this certainly isn’t what I expected.

“It’s good to see you, too, Nick,” I respond and pull out of his hug. I step back from him, conscious of the fact that Martin is watching my every move. I gesture at Martin with one hand, never taking my eyes off of Nick. “This is my husband, Martin Fleming. Martin, Nicholas Criswell.” As Martin reaches around me to shake Nick’s hand, I realize that while the two of us are standing inside, Nick is still standing on the porch. “Please, Nick, come in. I didn’t mean to leave you standing on the porch.” I stumble over the words slightly and step backwards into the entryway.

I didn’t think his presence was going to have such an effect on me. I’ve been staring at

him since he got here, simply because I'm shocked to be seeing him at all. It's been quite a few years. "Lora, we can move out of the hallway," Martin whispers fiercely in my ear, nudging me at the same time.

"Wha...? Oh, yes, right. Here, Nick, let me take your jacket. Come in, sit down, make yourself at home." This is too weird. He follows Martin into the family room, leaving me to hang up his coat in the closet. I take my time. Now that he's here, I'm not exactly sure what to say to him. I must have squandered all of my time since I talked to him, since I certainly didn't spend any of it thinking about what I was going to say once I got this man in my house.

As I move into the family room, I am startled to hear Martin and Nick talking rather amiably. Honestly, I wasn't sure how Martin was going to react. The situation this morning was far from pleasant. I know he's angry with me still--and probably rightfully so. I'm relieved, though, that he's not trying to work against me.

"How was your flight?" I ask Nick during a lull in the conversation. Not the most exciting or original question ever asked, but it gets me into the conversation.

"Not bad, actually. It was strange for me, being in the Indianapolis Airport again. I hadn't been there since I left--it's changed quite a lot. So many little shops and stores; I felt like I was in a mini-mall." He laughs at his own observation, but it's an accurate one. Martin and I took Caleb and Olivia to the airport several years ago, when they left on their honeymoon, and I had the same feeling.

The conversation hits a patch of silence and rests there; the thought of Caleb and Olivia reminds me why Nick is here. Martin glances at me out of the corner of his eye. "Nick, would you like something to eat or drink?" he asks suddenly, still giving me the eye.

Caught off guard, Nick responds that he'd like some coffee. Martin looks significantly at me again as he walks into the kitchen, and I realize what he's doing. Nick and I are left alone in the family room, and what is more logical than for me to pour my heart out?

I scoot to the edge of the couch and lean forward, facing Nick. "Look, Nick, there are some things I need to tell you, as you may have guessed from what I said on the phone. I did, in fact, invite you out here for a very specific reason. I don't even know where to begin with this, and I could probably say it better than I will, but I don't know how. So if you could please just listen to what I have to say, I would appreciate it." The words come out in a rush. If I have to say them, I want to get them out as fast as possible. I look up at Nick and find that he is frowning slightly at me, and looking very confused, but nodding. Taking this to mean he'll listen, I rush on.

I reach into the drawer of the end table and pull out a stack of pictures--pictures from inside the "box of Nick" that I didn't give to Caleb--and clutch them to my chest as I continue talking. "When you left, I was devastated," I begin, speaking more slowly this time than before. "I gave you my whole heart and soul--everything that makes me *me*--because I loved you. I thought you would propose, that we would live happily ever after. You went to Washington, and my fantasy life was crushed." Nick opens his mouth to speak, and I hold up one hand to stop him. "I'm not saying this to make you feel guilty. I just want you to understand where I'm coming from and what I was going through. OK?"

He nods without speaking, and I notice that Martin has come back into the room. He hands Nick a mug of coffee, hands me a glass of water, and perches unobtrusively on the opposite end of the couch from me. I pick up where I left off. "I was so upset that it came as no

surprise to me when I started to feel physically ill. Then, when I started to feel better mentally but not physically, I decided that maybe something else was wrong; maybe I should see a doctor. So I did.” My voice drops down to a near-whisper for the last sentence. “The doctor told me I was pregnant.”

I sit, staring at the floor, for a long moment before looking up to meet Nick’s eyes. He’s staring at me, dumbfounded. “What?” he asks quietly, his voice a mixture of wonder and absolute shock. I can see tears shining in his eyes.

“My son, Caleb,” I explain slowly, “is also your son.”

“Are those picture of him?” he asks, indicating the stack of photos that I’m still clutching to my chest. This is not the reaction I had anticipated. I expected anything from anger to disbelief, but certainly not this.

“Yes, they are,” I say, still not loosening my grip on them.

“May I see them?” Nick asks, still in the same quiet voice, reaching towards me. Suddenly drawing back his hand, he stands up. In just a few short steps he crosses the room and sits on the couch next to me.

Martin is still sitting at the opposite end of the couch; Nick is now sitting between us. Martin has been watching our conversation with morbid fascination. Nick’s moving to sit beside me seems to displease him, though. I have a feeling that had he known it was coming he would have moved over and sat right against me, preventing Nick from being this close. It’s strange for me to see him jealous; it’s never been in his nature before. On one hand--especially in this situation--it’s kind of annoying, but on the other hand it makes me feel loved.

I hold the stack of pictures out to Nick, glad that I had the foresight to gather them and

stack them in chronological order. On top is me, pregnant. The rest of the pictures are of Caleb, starting with the picture taken in the hospital and running up to Clara's birth a little over a year ago. I have more family shots, but I'm saving those for later. "This is you? I can't believe this is really you, Lora!" Nick exclaims over the first picture. He looks slowly through the pictures of Caleb, taking his time and studying them from various angles, as if trying to get a three-dimensional image of his son.

I occasionally inject comments about the various pictures-- "Caleb's graduation from kindergarten," "His first school dance," and similar words of explanation. As Nick makes his way through the stack, Martin moves closer, until he is close enough to look over Nick's shoulder and give his own input on the photos.

The last two pictures are the most recent I've included--a professional picture of Caleb and Olivia with Martin and me, taken the day of their wedding, and a shot of Caleb, Olivia and Clara that I took in the hospital the night Clara was born. "This is their baby?" Nick asks, looking intently at the last picture.

"Yes, Clara. She was born..." I begin to explain.

"I have a granddaughter," Nick says in wonder, still staring at the picture. "I have a son *and* a granddaughter!"

"Tell me about him, Lora--and Martin--,please. I want to know about my son," Nick implores pleadingly. I look uncertainly at Martin, who widens his eyes at me and shrugs his shoulders slightly.

Where to begin? How should I go about catching Nick up on the entire lifetime of his son? "What would you like to know about him, Nick?" I ask, hoping he'll give me an idea of



what to say.

“Anything, everything. When was he born?”

I am saddened to hear Nick begging for information about Caleb. I am sorry that he never knew his son. I wish, now, that I would have told him I was pregnant. But then I have to remember that he abandoned me, that I had no idea how to get in touch with him then, even if I wanted to. Finding him this time around was a pure stroke of luck. It’s strange how all of the hard feelings I’ve harbored against him have disappeared in light of this new situation. “Caleb was born June 16, 1973. I went into labor the day before, during the afternoon...”

I begin to recount for Nick the events of Caleb’s early years, helped along by interjections from Martin. For me, one recollection sparks another, and then another, until the whole effect snowballs and I feel as though I can’t talk fast enough to accommodate the ideas that are assailing my brain. Through it all, though, I am careful not to tell too much, not to reveal any secrets that Caleb would not want revealed to this man who, though he is Caleb’s biological father, is a total stranger to Caleb and Martin--and, in some ways, even to me.

When I finally stop talking, my vocal chords are exhausted. Looking at my watch, I realize that Nick has been here for over four hours, and I’ve been talking for a good two and a half of those. I’ve told him the story of Caleb’s life, up through Clara’s birth and the past year. I’ve carefully left out any mention of Clara’s illness and Caleb and Olivia’s worries about having another child. Too much information too soon is never a good idea.

“Lora,” Nick begins now in a serious tone, “does he know about me?”

This, of course, is a question that I expected. And now for the moment of truth: time to tell Nick why, exactly, I summoned him out here. “Yes, Nick, he does,” I affirm. “I told him

about you just two days ago, on Sunday.”

“Why now, Lora, after all these years?” Nick ask quizzically. “If he knew nothing about me until two days ago, and I knew nothing about him, why bring it up? Though I’m absolutely elated to discover that I have a son, I can’t imagine that Caleb would share my joy, to say nothing of how Martin must be feeling right now, having me invade his turf.”

“You’re right, of course. This hasn’t been easy on any of us,” I reply. “Nick, Clara is sick. When she was only several months old, she was diagnosed with Tay-Sachs Disease. She’ll likely live for a few more years, but the prognosis for a long lifetime is not good. Odds are, she’ll die before the age of five. Caleb and Olivia want to have another child, eventually, but they are worried that the next baby may be afflicted with the same problems as Clara.”

“That’s understandable,” Nick says quietly, though his expression belays the fact that he has not yet figured out what this has to do with him.

Martin picks up where I left off. “Caleb and Olivia came to us several weeks ago, before Lora called you. They asked the two of us to have some genetic testing done so that the doctors could determine what the risk would be for another child of their’s to be affected with Tay-Sachs. Of course we agreed; we wanted to help our son have a healthy baby. We were tested once, and then again. Both results came back the same: Caleb hadn’t inherited the Tay-Sachs gene from either of us.” Martin pauses, letting his words hang heavily in the air.

“Of course,” I explain, clarifying, “we--Martin and I--knew that Caleb hadn’t inherited this gene, or any others, from him; we were hoping that he had inherited it from me. When the tests came back as they did, I knew that I was going to have to explain to Caleb how this seeming freak of nature occurred. And that, Nick, is why I needed to speak with you in person,” I

conclude.

“I...um..I...I’m at a loss for words. I think this is more shocking than what you told me before.” Nick stands up from where he was still seated between Martin and me on the couch and walks to the front window, where he stands, staring out. Just two days earlier, Caleb stood in almost the exact same place, doing the exact same thing--turning away from me because of something that I told him.

Martin moves closer and wraps his arm around me. Now, in the silence, with everything off my chest, I realize the bizarre nature of this situation. Here I am in the family room of my home, sitting on the couch with my husband while my former lover stands with his back to us, staring out the window. One of these men is the biological father of my child, the other is the legal father. I honestly never thought that I would be living a “movie-of-the-week” life, but here I am.

“Nick?” I address the word to his back from my position on the couch.

“Lora, I’m just...not ready to handle this right now,” he says slowly, turning to face us. “I mean, I’ve been up since six this morning, I was on a plane for several hours, I drove up here from the airport. I’m just too tired to have this conversation now.”

“Of course. I understand,” I assure him in what I hope is an understanding voice. I *do* understand his reasons, but I don’t feel sorry for him. *He’s* too tired to have this conversation now? How does he think I feel--I’ve been dealing with this situation for over a month now. Nick doesn’t want to talk about this now, fine, we won’t talk about it now.

“I think I’m going to go back to the hotel and sleep.” As he starts to walk in the direction of the front door, I stand to follow him. “Thank you for telling me, Lora,” he says in a very

gentle, very firm voice.

At a loss for words, I nod. "We can finish talking in the morning," I assure him. I watch him climb into his car and drive away.

Despite my calm parting words to Nick, my insides are a tangled mess. Why does everyone in my life walk away?! I ask Beth about artificial insemination and she walks away from me. Martin and I have our first major fight in years and he walks out. I tell Caleb the truth about his father and he leaves. No one wants to face reality.

I slump against the wall and close my eyes. I understand, oh how I understand, that these are not easy issues. I realize that my revelations to both Caleb and Nick are huge shocks. I know that I have hurt Caleb, and I've probably frightened Nick. I know that Martin is angry with me for making what he considers to be rash decisions. All of this I understand. But, damn it, I wanted everything to work out fine.

In my mind I imagined this perfect little scene where Caleb was angry but understanding, and Nick--though shocked--took the news with surprising grace. Martin supported me, Nick and Caleb met and liked each other. No arguments, no hard feelings, no tears, no problems. I should have known better than to even allow myself to think like that. I *know* it's far from reality. I just want my life to be back to normal, whatever normal is. I don't know how I ever let myself think that this would be easy.

"Lora." I feel Martin's hand on my shoulder.

"I've had enough family drama for one day. Please don't say you want to talk about it," I implore him, opening my eyes and moving away from the wall. Martin stares at me for a moment, as though trying to decide whether or not to speak. Finally, he reaches for me with his

other arm and pulls me into an embrace. It feels so good to have someone supporting me; I lean against Martin with all my weight and wrap my arms tightly around him.

"I am exhausted," I say with a sigh when he finally releases me. Yawning, he nods.

The ringing of the telephone jolts me awake. I'm burrowed under a cocoon of blankets and sheets; I have no way of knowing what time it is. I unwrap myself as quickly as possible and fumble for the telephone, noticing as I do that Martin is no longer in his half of the bed. Why isn't he answering the phone? "Hi, Mom," Caleb's voice greets me when I finally find the telephone. "Were you sleeping?" he asks in a concerned voice. The shades are drawn in my room, so it's still hard to tell how light it is outside; it must be later than I thought, though. I squint at the clock. Ten o'clock. Ten?! How did I let myself sleep this late? Where is my husband, and why didn't he wake me up?

"What?" Caleb is still talking, but I haven't heard a word he's said.

"Is something wrong, Mom?"

"No, sweetie. I just didn't realize it was so late. I should have been up hours ago. What were you saying?"

"We want to talk to Nick--all of us," he repeats.

I hear him this time, but it's hard to believe what he's saying. I am momentarily at a loss for words. This is what I wanted, right? A big family reconciliation. So why don't I know how to react, now that my son is agreeing to it? "Who is 'all of us'?" I ask, though I can probably guess.

"Well, Olivia, Beth, and me--and of course we'd bring Clara." So it's to be him with

Olivia's family, then. I feel almost as if we've drawn sides: the Flemings (and Nick) against the Saunderses--but Caleb's gone over to the other side. "Is he there?" Caleb's voice breaks into my thoughts.

"No, Caleb, he's not. I just woke up, remember. I'm sure he's at his hotel, probably still suffering from some jet lag. I've got his phone number, would you like me to give it to you?" I wonder what he meant by asking if Nick was here. I can't imagine that would think I was carrying on an affair after all these years...Maybe I'm reading too much into the question. Either way, I should definitely stop thinking about it.

"I don't really want to call him," Caleb replies hesitantly. "What did you tell him about me yesterday? Or did you even?"

I am propped on my elbow, talking with Caleb, attempting to arrange a meeting between him and Nick when the bedroom door opens and Martin sticks his head in. He furrows his brow at the sight of me on the phone, then stage whispers "Nick's here." The door closes and he's gone. Great. Just what I need. I haven't even made it out of bed yet, much less showered or dressed and now I'm supposed to go out and talk to Nick? I guess I didn't specifically tell him to call this morning, but it would have been nice to warn me that he was coming. This whole situation has put me in a really grouchy mood.

I quickly wrap up my conversation with Caleb, then hop in the shower. I pull on the first decent clothes I find and braid my hair rather than spend time drying it. I sneak into the kitchen and fix myself some juice and a bowl of cereal before making my way into the family room to greet Nick. I can make out the murmur of his and Martin's voices from the kitchen; I wonder

what they're saying.

Walking into the family room, my question is answered. I find Martin and Nick kneeling of the floor, one on each side of our ancient vacuum cleaner. "See, this little piece here seems to have broken off," Martin is explaining, pointing to something I can't see.

"Did you try changing the belt?" Nick asks. "Sometimes that makes all the difference." This is interesting. Never in my life would I have imagined this scene. For one thing, I didn't know Nick was knowledgeable in the area of vacuum cleaner repair. Secondly, Martin and Nick are two very separate parts of my life. I wanted and have tried to make a distinction between my relationship with Nick and my marriage to Martin. I never wanted them to overlap, except in the area of Caleb--even then, I didn't want Nick to be a part of that. I guess I thought Nick wasn't a part of my life anymore.

"I'm afraid that thing's seen its last days; we're just going to have to buy a new one," I say in a forced light tone, stepping into the room.

"No, I can fix it!" Martin assures me with a laugh; we've had this conversation numerous times--about the vacuum cleaner and various other appliances. He stands up and comes to my side, putting his arm around me in an almost proprietary gesture. There is a moment of awkward silence. I've interrupted their discussion of vacuum maintenance, and we're all at a loss for words.

"I just spoke with Caleb," I say, addressing both men. Martin's expression is neutral, Nick's anticipatory. "Nick, he and Olivia want to see you today." At these words, a sigh escapes his lips, though from relief or dread I know not. "You arrived while I was on the phone with him, so I told him to come on over in a little while. I hope that won't be a problem."

“No...no, of course not. Honestly, I could think of little else last night,” he admits. “Do you know what it’s like to be forty-seven and find out you have a child you never knew about?” Though his question is completely rhetorical, it makes me laugh inside. The notion of me--or any woman--unknowingly having a child is preposterous. It’s not like pregnancy is something I could have slept through. You carry a child for nine months, you know about it. “Lora, is this going to be OK? Don’t mistake me, I’m very eager to meet Caleb--and his wife--but I’m worried that it will cause some familial trouble.”

“Don’t worry about that,” I respond with a half-laugh. “I’ve caused plenty of damage to this family myself during the past week. I don’t think anything you can do will be any worse.” I understand Nick’s worry, yet I find it almost comical. That he should be worried about causing familial strife, when I invited him out here for that very purpose. At times, I really wish I could blame him for some of the horrors my family--Caleb and Olivia in particular--is suffering, but rationally I know that I can’t. Life would be so much easier if only I could shake off that rational part of my mind.

I shake my head to clear my thoughts, aware that Nick and Martin are still silent, one standing on each side of me like gateposts. “I am going to go find myself something to drink,” I begin, indicating my now-empty juice glass. “Would either of you like something?” Negative shakes of the head from both. “Pretend I’m not here, go back to your vacuum cleaner. Caleb and Olivia should be here anytime.”

As I’m reaching into the refrigerator, Martin walks into the kitchen. “How are you doing?” he whispers, coming up behind me. “I’m sorry the phone woke you this morning. I was out getting the newspaper, then *he* showed up just as I was coming back inside. So Caleb



decided to meet him, huh? What do you think about that?"

"I don't know what to think, really. I expected that they would meet, though. I mean, I never imagined that I would say 'hey Caleb, you're biological father's here for a visit but you can't meet him.' When Nick first agreed to come out here, I knew in the back of my mind that this day would come. On a slightly different subject, Beth is coming with them. *That* makes me feel like we've chosen sides for the fight. I couldn't very well say no to her being here, though, after all she's gone through with Clara. What do *you* think--about Caleb meeting Nick, I mean." I turn the question around to him, still unsure of where our relationship stands.

"I don't like it--you know that and I won't deny it. However, you have a point in saying that Caleb needs to know the realities of his family. We probably shouldn't have kept this a secret for so long--it was wrong of me to insist that we do so. I just don't want to see Caleb hurt." The words are contradictory: he doesn't want Caleb meeting Nick, but he thinks we were wrong in hiding Nick's existence from him? I am glad to hear, though, that he agrees with me on this.

"Thank you," I whisper, setting my glass down and reaching to hug him. "I feel much better knowing we're going into this together. Speaking of which, we should go back in there. We've left Nick all alone."

The three of us, anticipating Caleb's arrival, are only forced to make small talk for several minutes. Martin hurries to put the vacuum away and Nick takes a seat on the couch when the doorbell rings. Olivia and Caleb traipse in, Beth on their heels. "I've told him you would be here," I say, glancing from Caleb to Olivia as we stand in the entryway. "I suppose that the rest is up to you," I say, taking Clara from Olivia. I stifle the urge to wish them good luck. While the

sentiment is appropriate, speaking the words aloud is not.

As I enter the family room, Caleb, Olivia, and Beth behind me, it strikes me that I need to make introductions. What to say, what to say? I step aside and let the three of them precede me into the room. “Go on, sit down,” I say quietly. Martin has brought in extra chairs from the kitchen; no one should have to sit on the floor. I am relieved to see that he has taken his seat on the couch beside Nick--it would be quite awkward were Caleb and Olivia left to sit there. “Well, I guess everyone is here,” I say with feigned cheer, looking around the room. Nick’s gaze has landed on Caleb and settled there. My poor baby, he must feel like a specimen under a microscope.

Where should I start? Do I introduce Nick first, or Caleb and his family? “Nick, this is my son--our son--Caleb,” I begin hesitantly, standing behind Caleb with one hand on his shoulder. “Olivia, his wife, and Beth Saunders, Olivia’s mother.” I indicate each woman in turn. “And this,” I say, moving closer to Nick and bending slightly, “is Caleb and Olivia’s daughter, Clara--your granddaughter. Everybody--Nicholas Criswell.” Much to my surprise, Nick reaches to take Clara from my arms. Apprehensively, I hand her over.

I wonder how the rest of this meeting between father and son should go. I can’t imagine that Caleb wants a public reconciliation with his father--despite the fact that the “public” in this case is all family--but I don’t want to excuse myself gracefully if they’re not prepared to be alone together. Though he’s holding Clara, Nick’s gaze still rests on Caleb. “I’m very happy you were able to come here and see me,” he finally says. “I know it must be difficult for you. Our situations are not comparable, but I know I was floored when your mother told me about you.” Nick’s voice is oddly formal and polite.

Caleb nods, but doesn't speak. If the situation were any but this, I would wonder why he requested this meeting, only to sit silent. Apparently unnerved by the silence, Nick tries another tack. "Your daughter is very beautiful." He strokes Clara's cheek with one finger. "She's got her mother's features," he says, glancing at Olivia, "but still some of you in her, Caleb."

Again, Caleb nods silently. "Your mother said she's ill?" Nick asks, framing the statement as a question, though he knows full well the extent of Clara's illness.

"Yes," Caleb affirms quietly. "Tay-Sachs Disease, a genetic disease, which--if I understand correctly--I inherited from you." I squeeze my eyes shut and grip my hands together. Though spoken in a quiet, level tone, so much hostility was packed into that one sentence.

"I believe Lora mentioned that, too," Nick replies, seemingly unruffled. "I would apologize for passing on the gene if I thought it would do any good. I *am* sorry that you're suffering so because of her ill health. All the same, you're very lucky to have her." These, the words of a man who has just met his twenty-four-year-old son.

"We think so," Olivia replies with a glance at Caleb.

Nick smiles briefly at Olivia, then turns again to Caleb. "Can you tell me a bit about the genetic testing you had done? That's something I'm not at all familiar with."

For the first time, Caleb speaks at length. This is easier for him to talk about because it is certain. "Well, it wasn't actually genetic testing in the traditional sense. Because of the nature of Tay-Sachs disease, a simple blood test can detect the presence of the gene in a person's genetic makeup. Olivia and I knew already that we were carrying the gene, because Clara inherited it from us," Caleb explains dispassionately.

"When did you come to realize that you hadn't inherited the gene from either of your

parents?" I wonder where Nick is going with these questions. We talked over some of this yesterday; I'm sure he knows the answers to his queries already.

"Olivia and I were--are--thinking of having another baby. We knew our risk of having another baby with Tay-Sachs was one in four, but we still thought it was important to have Mom and Dad tested, too. We were very concerned with knowing our family history." I cannot tell, either from Caleb's expression or his tone of voice, what he is feeling as he recounts this story for Nick.

"You had Mrs. Saunders tested, too?" Nick asks. "What about your father?" he asks, when Olivia nods.

Beth speaks up quickly to explain. "Olivia was conceived through artificial insemination using donor sperm from a sperm bank," she explains without the slightest reserve. This is not so difficult for her as for everyone else--she has always been open about this aspect of her life.

"A sperm bank in Seattle, no less," I say, trying to make some sort of it's-a-small-world connection between Nick and Beth.

A strange look crosses Nick's face. "Malcor?" he asks, staring directly at Beth now.

"Yeah," she responds with a surprised chuckle, "how did you know?"

Nick smiles in response. "This is almost embarrassing to admit, but I was a donor there, right after I moved to Seattle. I was a starving musician, in need of some cash..." he laughs and lets the sentence dangle. Wow, the things you learn about people two decades after you've lost touch with them. And here I'd thought nothing could shock me anymore. I was certainly wrong.

Silence suddenly fills the room again. "Caleb," Martin speaks up for the first time, "perhaps you and Nick would like to have some time alone to talk. Why don't you use your old

bedroom?” Nick, strangely more at ease in this house right now than Caleb is, hands Clara to Olivia, then stands and waits for Caleb to lead the way. Most of the tension in the room disappears as they do.

“Lora, could I bother you for something to drink?” Beth asks, standing and walking towards the kitchen.

“Of course; it wouldn’t be any bother.” I follow her to the kitchen, collecting drink orders from Martin and Olivia as I go.

“You know,” she says without preamble when the door swings shut behind us, “your friend Nick almost fits the profile for my sperm donor.” A look of horror crosses my face at these words, spoken so casually.

“Beth, what are you saying? You can’t mean you think that Nick...” The idea is almost too much for me to comprehend. I can’t believe she would suggest such a thing--besides, how can she remember the profile for her sperm donor, anyway? This sounds like something from a science-fiction novel, not something that would happen to real people. “That was twenty-three years ago, how can you remember what you read about him? That’s ridiculous. I think your imagination is working overtime,” I finish derisively.

“No, Lora, it’s not.” The glass Beth was holding clinks down hard on the counter as she turns to face me. “They gave me a printed sheet with a list of characteristics--eye color, hair color, height, build, profession, hobbies--for lots of different men. I kept the profile of the donor I selected. The government hadn’t stepped in to regulate sperm banks when Olivia was conceived; they didn’t see anything wrong with letting me keep this information. I’ve still got the sheet. I looked at it just after Olivia was diagnosed, thinking maybe I had missed something

in the ‘family genetic history’ section.” She laughs bitterly. “Of course, due to lack of regulation, no such section existed.”

“Think about it. Nick’s got the Tay-Sachs gene, we know that. My sperm donor also had it, evidently. Logic dictates that they could be the same person. He even said he donated there. You need to think about it.” Beth picks up her glass and walks from the room, leaving me speechless. It was one thing for her to propose this preposterous idea, but then to “support” it with her so-called evidence--that’s going too far. With the number of men who donated sperm at Malcor before Olivia was conceived, how likely is it that Beth would have been inseminated with Nick’s semen? Not very likely, I think.

Determined to ignore Beth’s claims, I walk back into the family room, a smile on my face. Shortly after, Nick and Caleb emerge from the bedroom, both with tearstained faces. I get the sense that some sort of reconciliation has occurred. Caleb smiles slightly, looking from Martin to me, and then back to Nick, before reclaiming his seat next to Olivia.

Beth looks significantly at me and me and inclines her head towards Nick. She acts as though she’s so positive that Nick is Olivia father; I wonder if she’s considered the implications of this for our children. My only thought is that she hasn’t. To mention this idea of hers in front of Caleb and Olivia could cause some severe trauma.

“I need to feed Clara,” Olivia says, moving across the room to take her daughter from my arms, and mercifully creating a good excuse for her to leave the room.

I hand the child to her and look at Caleb. “Aren’t you going to help her?” I ask in my ‘the-grown-ups-need-to-talk-so-why-don’t-you-leave’ voice. Caleb gives me a funny look; I understand what he’s thinking. What ‘grown-up’ conversation will we have that cannot include

him? He's no longer a child, after all. I say nothing, but motion him towards the kitchen with my head. Still giving me a puzzled look, he follows his wife.

"Nick, I believe Beth has something she would like to say to you," I say, looking from one to the other. Martin looks utterly confused, and I don't blame him. Oh, how I wish I could have spoken with him about this before allowing Beth to speak her mind. Maybe it's better this way, though. This family has to stop keeping secrets.

"I simply mentioned to Lora that you nearly fit the profile of my sperm donor," Beth tells Nick in a strong voice. Martin gasps audibly at the statement.

Nick looks at Beth, as though checking to be sure that she's serious. "Do you mean that?" he inquires mildly, with a slight laugh.

"Yes, I do," Beth responds simply, still staring at him.

"Let me get this straight," Martin interrupts harshly. "Beth, are you saying that you think Nick, by way of sperm donation, is Olivia's father? Do you *realize* what an accusation like that means?" My thoughts exactly.

"I'm not saying he is, I'm just saying it could be possible," Beth answers, her voice still calm. Apparently she has yet to think of the implications of her theory.

"Look, there's an easy way to solve this. Beth, you told me you still had a copy of your donor profile, correct? Why don't you go home and get it. Nick can look it over, tell you if it's him." A simple proposition, perhaps, but it should answer the question--provided that Nick remembers what information he reported to Malcor.

"What do you think about this?" Martin whispers to me, after Beth has left and Nick has

excused himself to the restroom. I shrug in response. I still don't know what to think; I certainly don't want to think that Nick is Olivia's father, as well as Caleb's. "Do you think she's just trying to get attention, or is she serious?" Again, I shrug. Neither of us knows Beth very well. I met her on several occasions before Caleb and Olivia married, and Martin and I have spent an increasing amount of time with her since Clara was diagnosed with Tay-Sachs. Outside of that, we've never spoken much.

"I can't understand what motive she would have in suggesting this if it weren't true. She must know how much damage she would be doing to mention this to either Olivia or Caleb, only to find she's wrong. They've both been through enough. I would think that's *she* has been through enough. Still, though, I almost have to think that she's making it up; the alternative is too awful." I stop speaking as Nick reappears in the room.

"Perhaps I will go check on Caleb and Olivia," Martin says, excusing himself and leaving me alone with Nick.

"What do you think of Beth's suggestions?" I ask Nick. His calm is beginning to unnerve me.

"I suppose it's possible; anything is possible. You know, I was on the internet the other day, and I read an article about a man who almost married his daughter--except he didn't know she was his daughter because her mother conceived her with donor sperm."

Well, that's an interesting human interest story, but I can't believe that he would recount it to me *now*, when a similar problem is facing *my family* and *his* son. I am unable to stop myself from saying as much. "Nick, how can you say that without the slightest bit of feeling? I saw you with tears on your face after you talked to Caleb earlier; I know something happened between the



two of you. How can you be so dispassionate about your own child?"

Nick looks deeply offended. "I'm not trying to be dispassionate, Lora, I'm trying to keep myself from becoming hysterical. I thought you knew me better than that. You should know better than to think that I could be so unfeeling."

"Me? I should know you're not unfeeling? How should I know that? Remember, this is the first time I've talked with you in twenty-two years!" Outraged now, I'm practically screaming, but I don't care. "You left me, promising to call, but never did. How could I think you were anything but cold-hearted and unfeeling? So don't tell me I should know what you feel. Because I *don't*! I didn't then, and I don't now."

Martin has come in from the kitchen, Olivia and Caleb with him. "Honey, are you OK?" he asks, once I've stopped screaming at Nick.

"Yes." I collapse onto the couch, spent. Most likely, I shouldn't have taken my pent-up emotions out on Nick. Everything I said was *true*, though. I wasn't making things up--I only said what I felt. "I'm sorry, Nick," I say quietly, raising my head to look at him.

He hasn't moved from his position in the chair. "No, you're right. I shouldn't have said what I did, and you had no way of knowing what I was feeling. It was unfair of me to expect that you would." He speaks these words with the same aura of coolness as those he spoke earlier, which only serves to make me angrier. I drop my head back onto the couch and close my eyes, hoping that Beth will return soon.

"Where is my mother?" Olivia asks, looking around the room in confusion.

"She went home for something," Martin replies. "She should be back any time now."

Olivia seems to accept that answer, and with Clara in her arms, returns to the kitchen. I wonder

what she must be thinking of our family right now--the secrets we've kept from Caleb, the family confrontation, and my sudden rage at Nick. She must be wondering what she's married into. In a way, I feel sorry for her. She didn't ask for this burden. Then again, neither did Caleb.

Beth enters through the front door without knocking. "Here it is," she cries triumphantly, sounding more joyful than a person in her position ought. She waves the papers briefly in front of Martin and I before handing them over to Nick. He holds them gingerly between two fingers, not yet reading the printed words.

"Are you sure you want to do this?" He looks only at Beth as he asks the question. The moment is faintly comical: it's like the part of the wedding when the priest asks if anyone present has any reason why the couple should not marry. Even if you know something, should you say it? I don't know. What I know is that I don't want Nick to look at those papers, because I'm afraid of what they say. And yet--I know he must, for all of our sakes.

"Please, read away," Beth replies gaily. Her cheer amazes me. Perhaps she, like Nick, is using one emotion to cover another.

Nick complies, and we wait tensely for him to finish. "Well?" Martin says expectantly, when Nick finally looks up from the sheaf of papers.

"Reading this was like going through a time warp," he replies in a voice full of wonder. "It's me; there's no doubt about that." Had we been speaking, we would have been stunned into silence. With two simple words--'it's me'--Nick changed our family forever.

I squeeze Martin's hand tightly as Clara's tiny casket is lowered into the ground, my mind

a tangled mess of emotions. After a moment, I can no longer bear to watch, and so I look at the faces around me--my son Caleb, Beth and Olivia Saunders, Nick Criswell (just in this morning from Seattle), and assorted other friends and family. The absence of Clara--living--is prominent. So much changed between the time this little girl was born and the day she died. If someone had told me I would go through all that I did, I would never have believe it. Things like that don't happen to real people, especially not to people like me.

"It's me." The words Nick Criswell spoke in the family room of my house slightly more than two years ago changed forever the course of my family. A week after Nick revealed this information, Beth filed a motion requesting to have the sperm bank records unsealed. Her motion was granted; she had valid cause in asking, after all. Malcor's records confirmed what we already knew: Elizabeth Saunders had received the semen of Nicholas R. Criswell all four times that she attempted to become pregnant via artificial insemination. The fourth attempt was successful.

Though I hadn't wanted any more secrets, the four of us--Beth, Nick, Martin, and I--had decided to hold off making mention of this to Olivia and Caleb until after the official information from Malcor had come through. I had no doubt that Nick knew for certain that the profile was his--but I understood Beth's point that a false alarm could be very damaging, despite being untrue. The information came back as we had anticipated, and telling our children became the next step.

Martin wasn't sure that he should even be involved. "I feel like I'm not part of this family," he confided to me one late night, as we lay in bed talking about the situation. That single statement wrenched my heart. Here was a man I cherished about all else in the world, the

father of my child--Nick be damned, he may have contributed genetic material, but Martin is Caleb's true father--and he felt like an outsider.

Martin was there, though. Sitting at Caleb and Olivia's kitchen table, with me on his right side and Nick and Beth to his left. We sat, a somber row, facing our confused children. *They* were under the impression that everything was fine. Caleb and Nick had reconciled; Olivia had begun to come to terms with the fact that her husband's family was not quite what she had thought.

We told them as gently as possible, Nick speaking first. "I was flat broke when I moved to Seattle," he began by way of explanation, then proceeded to explain how he learned through a friend that sperm banks pay men to donate. "I thought 'what a great deal'!" He managed a short laugh after this sentence, but the humor didn't last long.

As Beth began speaking, I could tell from Caleb's expression that he was putting two and two together--catching on to the point of the conversation. "When I met Nick--the same day that you two did--I thought he seemed similar to the donor profiled on the sheet I'd received from Malcor." As Beth explained her thought processes, Caleb's expression grew stonier, while Olivia seemed to crumple into herself. "The court granted an order to have Malcor's records unsealed for me, and the records showed what I had expected." Beth finished her explanation quietly, looking uneasily from her daughter to Caleb.

Caleb shoved back his chair so violently that it toppled. "What is this family--conspiracy central?" he shouted angrily. "Why didn't anyone mention this to us before? *You--*" he turned angrily to face Martin and I, "--how can I even know what's real anymore? You think hiding these things from me is better? You think it makes me feel better to know that my parents are

lying to me, looking me in the face and telling me *lies*? You might think you're protecting me, but you're not. *You're not!*" he finished angrily, tears rolling down his face.

I had known--suspected, at least--that this would happen. We had pushed him to the breaking point, Martin and I, and this revelation was enough to send him over. There was nothing I could do but cry along with him. As much as it hurt me, I couldn't comfort my own son. When I had composed myself, I spoke. "I know that nothing I can say will make either of you feel better. I know that we have done you irreparable damage--beyond the things we've said today. You've the right to be upset and angry, I can't deny that. I only hope you realize that we didn't hurt you intentionally. The decision was made--between the four of us--to wait until we had actual information from Malcor before bringing this up. Do you understand how much you could have been hurt had we decided to mention it before, only to find out that we were wrong?" Even to my ears, the words sounded like an excuse. "We didn't want to put you through all of these emotions needlessly.

"Caleb, I've said this to you before, but I'll say it again: I've always had your best interests in mind; everything I've done for you, I've done because I love you. I never wanted to see you hurt. I'm so sorry." Tears began to fall from my eyes again, and though I was sitting, I leaned against Martin for support.

The healing process was long and arduous--and I'm not sure that it's completely over. We left them that day, married half-siblings staring at each other in horror. "How did this happen to us?" I heard Olivia whisper as I went out the door. My heart bled for them. Their marriage was annulled. Had they known the nature of their relationship, a marriage would not

have been legal; annulment was the obvious answer.

That took care of the legal aspect, and affirmed their decision not to have another child. I was relieved, as Caleb later confessed to me that he was, that he and Olivia had ultimately decided that the one-in-four risk was too great a chance to take.

The emotional aspect of their marriage, however, was more difficult to end. I knew, from observing them at all stages of their relationship, that Olivia and Caleb were deeply in love. How does one turn off such a feeling? I've no idea, and I'm thankful I've never had to try. They must have had endless discussions about it. Caleb told me about some of them--much later, after he had dealt with his anger towards me.

Martin and I attempted to be supportive and helpful, but ours was not an easy task. We both felt guilty for putting Caleb--and Olivia--through this. Dr. Emmeline Mann, a family therapist, was a huge help through the whole process. I wasn't sure that Caleb and Olivia, and even Beth, would agree to see her, but they were quite willing. She served as a mediator for numerous discussions, helping us work through our feelings without stepping on too many toes. I honestly don't know what would have become of my family if Lily hadn't suggested her to me.

I'm still seeing her, actually. Nick's reappearance in my life has awaked so many memories and emotions that were lying dormant for many years. Talking to Martin about them was nearly impossible--he was too closely connected to not be hurt by some of my words. Dr. Mann is unbiased, which makes her a great listener. During our sessions, I'll sometimes talk for the whole hour, leaving her no time to analyze what I've said. That might be a good thing. Right now I just need someone to listen. I don't need to hear that my feelings stem from an unresolved issue related to toilet-training.

I thought we were going to be OK. Caleb and Olivia had reached a point where they could still be friends and parents to their daughter, with a minimum of strange feelings between them. They would never be the same again, but it could work--at least for Clara's sake. Nick was getting to know Caleb; they're relationship was developing well. His stay in Indiana, originally planned for five days, extended into several weeks. I know the thought of moving back crossed his mind, but in the end, he said, Seattle was his home. Olivia was still resisting any involvement with him, but has stopped acting overtly hostile. Martin and I, through our sessions with Dr. Mann, had managed to get our relationship back on solid ground.

Then a late-night call came from Olivia; Clara was in the hospital. The prognosis didn't look good. We gathered around her tiny form in the hospital bed: an odd assortment of characters, but a family nonetheless. She lasted only a few hours before her breathing gradually slowed, then stopped. Her death affected all of us, about that there is no doubt.

As I stand here now, my tiny granddaughter now under a mound of earth, I have to wonder what will become of us. The sun is shining brightly this day, a stark contrast to our sadness. I want to be optimistic; I want very much to believe that "everything will be all right." I think, though, that some of my optimism had died with Clara. The world is not as I thought it was. In the space of two years, I've aged twenty. If I looked at the world with a child's optimism before, it's certainly an adult's cynicism that I've adopted now. I can only hope that somewhere down the road I will find a happy medium between the two.

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